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REAL SOUTHERN CULTURE

TEXAS WINE
The other other wine country
High Plains and Hill Country, TX

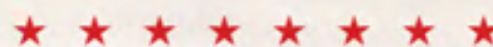
SOUTHERN SOLE
Polishing up on custom shoes
Nashville, TN

WILD IN THE DELTA
Bringing a little bit of wild to the farm
Sumner, MS

CHEF JOHN FLEER
Growing deep roots in his community
Asheville, NC

Top right: Hop on a cruisng bike in a rainbow of hues and explore Beaufort on your own or with the guides from Hungry Town Tours.

BEAUTIFUL WILD AND ALWAYS WELCOMING



BEAUFORT, NORTH CAROLINA

Written by Jennifer Kornegay
Photography courtesy of Carteret County Tourism Development Authority

SITTING SO VULNERABLY ON THE EDGE OF LAND AND SEA, BEAUFORT AND THE BARRIER ISLANDS HAVE CREATED A HEARTY BUT HOSPITABLE CHARACTER IN A PLACE THAT'S HANGING ONTO ITS RICH HERITAGE.

Lines of sailboat masts slice through views of bluebird sky and rippling water jostling radiant pinpricks of sun. Turn around, and you're facing short, plump oaks with the storefronts of a quaint main street just beyond. Gulls screech overhead; old oyster shells crunch underfoot; and a constant gentle breeze kisses your cheeks. Welcome to Beaufort, North Carolina, only one of the gems putting a brilliant sparkle on the state's Crystal Coast, which also includes Atlantic Beach, Emerald Isle, Harkers Island, Cape Lookout and Morehead City.

This collection of narrow barrier islands stretches 85 miles to form the center of the state's long Atlantic coastline (and the southernmost end of the outer banks), and sitting so vulnerably on the edge of land and sea has created a hearty but hospitable character in a place that's hanging onto its rich heritage (that includes pirate treasure, shipwreck tragedies and Civil War skirmishes) as tightly as its spot above water. The area also maintains a firm grip on its still-untamed enclaves; and there are many, with 56 miles of the islands' shores contained in the protected Cape Lookout National Seashore. It's a combination that's been enchanting folks for hundreds of years, and it becomes quickly apparent that the Crystal Coast always has its welcome mat out and the locals are happy to share their home.

Time Travel

The mix of Beaufort's many charms — tree-lined streets, a waterfront boardwalk, cute boutiques — has secured its spot on several "best small town" lists in recent years, but as the third oldest town in the state, its multi-layered history is the essential element of its appeal. Explore it with a stroll past the long succession of homes (both cozy cottages and elegant mansions) facing Taylor's Creek, most fresh white with wide porches and plaques revealing their age. Or hop on a cruising bike (in a rainbow of hues and complete with wicker basket) and follow the friendly, knowledgeable guides, David and Betsy Cartier, owners of Hungry Town Tours. The couple offers several different options, but the Hidden Beaufort Tour will have you pedal pushing through the town while feasting on some lesser-known nuggets from the past. And Hungry Town also leads culinary tours that serve a side of history with samplings from some of Beaufort's best restaurants.

For a more concentrated look back, walk through the North Carolina Maritime Museums in Beaufort to peruse exhibits and displays that uncover the deep connections between the area and the ocean as well as the islands' colorful past. Of note are artifacts (belt buckles, cannons, beads and more) recovered from the "Queen Anne's Revenge," the vessel captained by Blackbeard that sunk three miles off Beaufort's shores in 1718.

Centuries of area mystery and memory rest at Beaufort's Old Burying Ground, one of the oldest cemeteries in North Carolina. While some are only barley legible, faded, vine-covered tombstones tell stories of lives well lived and many cut far too short. One marks the final resting place of a young girl interred in a unique casket. Legend says she died on the voyage from England, and her grief-stricken father, unable to give her to the sea, placed her body in an empty rum barrel and buried her in it upon arrival. Even now, visitors moved by the tale leave tokens of all types at her grave.

At Fort Macon State Park in Morehead City, you'll find a well-preserved 1830s brick and stone stronghold that saw several Civil War conflicts. After it was deactivated, the fort and surrounding land were sold to the state in the 1920s to be used

Above: Downtown Beaufort offers front row views of the activity at the expansive harbor front docks. **Top left:** The Crystal Coast is a fishing paradise. Chartered fishing adventures with deep water catches are waiting. **Top upper right :** Historic Beaufort's picturesque downtown is filled with history mixing with shops and restaurants. **Top bottom right:** A three-mile boat ride to the barrier islands of Cape Lookout National Seashore to the Lighthouse, built in the 1850's, stands at the southernmost point guarding the Outer Banks. **Bottom right:** Water lovers will find one of the best ways to explore the coastal area is from a kayak. **Center left:** Although the current fort standing at Fort Macon State Park was built in 1834 it is only the latest fort built to defend the waterway starting in the 1750s. **Center right:** Enjoy a cocktail at Circa 81 in Beaufort, there are more than 30 to choose from, including seven different mojitos. **Bottom left:** Dozens of historic homes line the streets, each noted with a plaque granted by the Beaufort Historical Association.

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(continued)

Fuller
House
c1831

Top left: Owner/Chef Clarke Merrell's menu at Circa 81, in Beaufort, offers a superb dining experience with his farm/sea to table menu, supporting local fishermen and farmers. **Top right:** Discover the easy access of Atlantic Beach where everything from the beach to historic Fort Macon are just a walk away. **Opposite:** Shackleford Banks at Cape Lookout National Seashore is home to a herd of more than 110 wild horses living freely without aid.

as a public park. But during World War II, from 1941-1944, the U.S. Army leased the fort back from the state and manned it with troops to protect other nearby facilities that could be enemy targets. Today, it's one of North Carolina's most visited parks, thanks to its blend of history, nature trails and expansive, unsullied beaches, perfect for swimming and fishing.

Get On (and In) the Water

Options for up-close experiences with the Crystal Coast's natural blessings are abundant. Outfitters like Hot Wax Surf Shop in Emerald Isle will set you up for a few hours of on-water exploration. Paddle a kayak through narrow inlets and tidal creeks lined with swaying marsh grass and into hidden coves shaded by maritime forest while keeping an eye out for rays and osprey. If a slow float isn't enough action, add a rod and reel to your rental and try to land some speckled trout or flounder. If you're truly adventurous, catch a wave. The folks at Hot Wax can provide surfboards and some expert instruction. Or, leave the surface behind and delve into the clear, warm waters on the ocean side of the islands, where multiple shipwrecks in the "graveyard of the Atlantic" await discovery. With more than 100 feet of visibility, it's been hailed "a diving enthusiast's dream."

Go Wild

At Cape Lookout National Seashore, the mild breezes from "in town" are replaced by swift gusts of salty winds that shape sand dunes and push with and against the tumultuous Atlantic pounding its shores. Undeveloped and unspoiled, its small islands are the crown jewels of the Crystal Coast and reachable only by boat (a ferry runs from a visitor center on Harkers Island). The low-slung land barley breaches sea level, and sandbars jutting out miles create navigational hazards that have taken down hundreds of ships. In 1812, a lighthouse was erected to warn sailors of the dangers just under water.

The current 163-foot-tall beacon with its distinctive diamond pattern (built in 1859) is now a hallmark of the Seashore and invites visitors up to its top. Climbing the 207 steep and narrow steps will have you huffing, but the panoramic view of the pale sands and gradients of blue in swirls of cerulean and indigo is well worth the effort. After the hike, soak up some sunshine on the un-crowded beaches, or stroll and search for shells.

While a variety of native animals call the Seashore islands home, thanks to their majestic beauty and the questions surrounding their origin, the more than 100 wild horses living freely on Shackleford Banks garner the most attention. Although unproven, tales of horses swimming ashore from sinking ships continue to capture imaginations. Meander quietly along faint footpaths tramped into the scattered grasses, and you can often spot members of the herd and observe them grazing and interacting from a safe distance. They've thrived on the island for centuries and remain protected as living symbols of the Crystal Coast's cultural heritage.

Coastal Cuisine

Eating alfresco is easy and apropos on the Crystal Coast, as is filling up on fresh-caught seafood. At Front Street Grill in the heart of the Beaufort historic district, local ingredients underpin every dish. Try the pimento cheese with pickled okra and the chili-lime shrimp tacos. And enjoy it all on the deck while watching another herd of wild horses roaming on Carrot Island.

Or snag a seat on the back patio at Beaufort Grocery Co. and choose from its diverse selection of Southern favorites, like Carolina crab cakes with spicy remoulade and pan-seared shrimp and scallops with basil and roasted tomatoes.

Step things up a bit at Circa 81 in Morehead City, where chef and owner Clarke Merrell is putting his innovative twists on the area's bountiful produce and seafood on both small and large plates. Think sweet potato quesadillas, crispy fried softshell crab and salty-sweet truffle honey pork belly. Pair your selections here with just the right craft cocktail; there are more than 30 to choose from, including seven different riffs on the mojito.

And don't leave the Crystal Coast without digging into its unofficial signature dish, the shrimp burger. Grab a bun full of tender fried shrimp (topped with slaw and tartar sauce) at Big Oak Drive-In on Emerald Isle or El's Drive-In located in Morehead City.

After mere hours, the Crystal Coast's allure is clear. Spend a few days there, and even the area's wild horses will have a hard time dragging you away.

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> "MEANDER QUIETLY ALONG FAINT FOOTPATHS TRAMPED INTO THE SCATTERED GRASSES, AND YOU CAN OFTEN SPOT MEMBERS OF THE HERD AND OBSERVE THEM GRAZING AND INTERACTING FROM A SAFE DISTANCE."

SEE:

Horses of Shackleford Banks
www.nps.gov/calo/learn/nature/horses.htm

Cape Lookout National Seashore
www.nps.gov/calo/index.htm

Old Burying Grounds
www.beaufort-nc.com/beaufort-old-burying-ground.htm

North Carolina Maritime Museums
www.ncmaritimemuseumbeaufort.com

EAT:

City Kitchen
232 W Beaufort Rd.
Beaufort
(252) 648-8141

Sweet Beans Coffee & Cafe
2302 Arendell St., Ste G
Morehead City
(252) 247-6020

Shark Shack
100 S Durham Ave
Atlantic Beach
(252) 723-6589

SHOP:

Bridges Street Pottery
1910 Bridges St.
Morehead City
(252)723-9981

Salt Marsh Cottage
108 Front St.
Swansboro
(910) 708-1166

Calypso Cottage
324 Orange St.
Beaufort
(252) 728-4299

STAY:

The White House
3346 Freedom Way, Hubert
(954) 242-5764
www.stayatthewhitehouse.com

The Inn on Turner
217 Turner St., Beaufort
(919) 271-6144
www.innonturner.com

The Cedars Inn
305 Front St., Beaufort
(800) 548-2961
www.cedarsinn.com

DO:

Olympus Dive Center
www.olympusdiving.com

Rachel Carson Coastal Estuarine Reserve
www.beaufort-nc.com/rachel-carson-reserve

Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center
www.coresound.com

Kitty Hawk Kites
www.kittyhawk.com/adventures

it's in the WATER

SOUTHERN OYSTERS

Written by Jennifer Kornegay / Photography by Rory Doyle

Johnathan York, farm manager of Pensacola Bay Oyster Co. separates oysters for harvest.

A SETTING LATE-SUMMER SUN HAS TURNED WISPS OF CLOUD INTO COTTON CANDY. A SLIGHT BREEZE WRINKLES THEIR REFLECTION ON THE WATER BELOW. A DINNER WITH GOOD FRIENDS ON THE SECOND-STORY DECK OF A FAVORITE RESTAURANT, FISHER'S IN ORANGE BEACH, ALABAMA, IS PUSHING THE EVENING NEAR PERFECTION WHEN THE LANKY OWNER, JOHNNY FISHER, BRINGS OVER A DOZEN OYSTERS WE HADN'T ORDERED, A LITTLE TREAT FROM HIM AND THE CHEF.

"Try these and let me know what you think," he says. "I want to know which you prefer. Six are from an oyster farm on Chesapeake Bay; the others are Point aux Pins farmed oysters from here." While the rest of the table seems giddy, I'm frozen. I've only eaten raw oysters a few times before and didn't really like them, a fact that was a secret shame. As a "food writer," I felt I should like all food and certainly raw oysters – a delicacy appreciated by refined palates. So I follow the lead of my dinner companions and grab an oyster, one of the smaller ones, without recalling which type it was. I take a deep breath, tilt my head back, put the shell edge to my lips and slurp. I steel myself for the overwhelming mouthful of rubbery mud I was expecting and almost melt out of my chair with relief and pleasure when I feel silk and taste salt instead. I go for another, the bigger one this time, so I can do as my friend Johnny has asked and give my opinion. This one is good too, but not as good. "The smaller one is best," I declare. My husband and one friend agree. "That's the Alabama oyster," Fisher says. (The other friend chose the Chesapeake oyster, but being from Maryland, I think hometown pride tainted her judgment.) I am both delighted and intrigued. I pepper Johnny with questions about what oyster farming is, and how long it's been going on in Alabama. It's September 2014, and I learn that it's pretty new and that if I want to know more, I need to meet Dr. Bill Walton, aka Dr. Oyster. So, after a few emails, I do.

Farming Facts

Two months later, on an oddly cold November day, Dr. Bill Walton, Auburn University associate professor and extension specialist, welcomes me to the AU Shellfish Lab

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on Alabama's Dauphin Island, where he gives me an oyster-farming primer before boating me out to a grouping of starter oyster farms in Portersville Bay. Over a few hours, I learn facts, but as he speaks, his excitement building with my understanding and interest, I also discover his dedication to the off-bottom farming techniques he and his team at the lab have been developing and teaching, the methods needed for successful oyster farming in the Gulf of Mexico and along the southern Atlantic. The research they and others (like John Supan, director at the Louisiana Sea Grant Oyster Lab) have been conducting and sharing has been instrumental in reinventing what it means to be an oysterman in the South and is spawning a new industry in our region's coastal communities.

Off-bottom oyster farming is a fairly simple concept. Farmers place baby oysters into mesh bags or baskets that are suspended (either hanging on lines strung between poles or buoyed by floats attached to securing ropes anchored to sandy floors) in the salt water of bays along the coasts. Just as they would on wild oyster beds, the oysters grow and thrive by pulling food from the seawater they filter through their shells. There's no genetic modification, no chemicals added or medication used. It's a process that works in harmony with Mother Nature while providing the advantage of increased control. Farmers can better protect their oysters from weather by changing their position in the water column. They can manipulate the cup size of an oyster (a deep cup means plump, soft meat) by tumbling their oysters in a steel drum to sheer off the new shell growth on the edges or by setting their bags or baskets in such a way that the movement of waves does the same thing. Moving the baskets also allows farmers to keep their bags or baskets clean and keep the shells free of barnacles and other pests than can, at worst, harm the oysters and at best, mar the shells' natural beauty, a big benefit when marketing to restaurants that serve them on the half-shell. In six to 18 months, the farmers harvest mature oysters and sell them directly to individuals and restaurants, to seafood wholesalers or a mix of all three.

While oyster farming is creating a brighter future for Southern oysters, Walton stresses it's not and never will be a replacement for wild oysters, simply a supplement. "Farming will never provide the quantity you get in the wild, even in down years, even with the issues facing the wild harvests," he says. Farmed oysters are also intended for a different, premium market.

It's In the Water

In ocean-side towns of the Northeast, shellfish farming, both clams and oysters, has been going on for decades. But it wasn't until the early 2000s that it showed up in Southern waters. And it was later for the Gulf of Mexico. Frank Roberts has one of the older farms. The retired Marine and FBI agent started Lady's Island Oyster Co. raising Single Lady oysters in Seabrook, South Carolina, in 2005, and he doesn't shy away from heralding the quality of his harvest. A faded military tattoo on his bicep twitches as he peers through reading glasses to work an oyster open with a hinge shuck. A pop and flip with his weathered oyster knife, and he presents his prize. "Mine are salty, with a sweet middle and real clean finish," he said. "It's like kissing the sea on the

Top: Sorting and tumbling oyster seed to grade them by size and clean off the bio-fouling.
Center Lane Zirlott, owner of Murder Point Oysters.
Bottom: Freshly opened Southern oyster.

right on the lips."

Salt is a key flavor in oysters, but not the only one. A true connoisseur can detect bright evergreen, creamy sweetness, citrusy zing and/or a sharp mineral finish. Even the average eater can discern differences that go beyond brine. And since, in the South, the farmers are all raising the same species (crassostrea virginica), each farmed oyster's diverse characteristics are created by their location and the unique makeup of the water they grow in. Mirroring the wine world's concept of "terroir," oyster enthusiasts use the term "merroir" to describe it. Single Lady oysters get their distinct taste from the tidal saltwater creeks flowing into Roberts' farm plots near the open Atlantic, where the only freshwater comes from rain.

Steve Pollock in Louisiana is just as pleased with his product. He retired from teaching biology at LSU to devote attention to his Triple N Oyster Farm in the waters of Caminada Bay off Grand Isle in mid-2017, but he started the farm in 2015. His wife Ginger, who's also a biology professor and is still teaching, runs the operation with him. "We've got such pristine water here," he says. "It comes right into our area from the Gulf, so it's really salty. I mean ours are as good as Murder Points, but they're different, too. All of the farmed oysters are."

Murder Point oysters are raised in Sandy Bay in Alabama by the Zirlott family and have garnered consistent raves. With a taste the owners rightly dub "buttery," they could be nameless and probably earn praise. But part of their appeal is definitely clever branding, with the tagline "oysters worth killing for" and a dark backstory to boot. Their tale claims that a fight over oyster-harvesting rights in the 1920s led one man to kill another on a low-lying finger of land that defines the outer edge of the bay adjacent to one of the Zirlott's farms. The incident gave the spot its sinister name, and they thought using it for their oysters would grab attention. The rise of named, branded oysters is an interesting aspect of the industry. Today, consumers can chose from Isle Dauphine oysters, Outlaw oysters, Stones Bay oyster, Shellbank Selects and so many more.

Farming Family

Oyster farmers are all recognizing the importance of marketing their product, and they're all facing some similar challenges too, like the current inability to get insurance for their equipment (like land-based farmers can) and the hurdles of government regulations (that can vary greatly from state to state). These common threads are being tied together by Oyster South, a non-profit dedicated to the advancement of oyster aquaculture in our region.

Formed in 2016, Oyster South is building a community that includes farmers, chefs, equipment suppliers, researchers, seafood dealers and more. It's assembled the needed knowledge, with a who's who of the oyster-farming world sitting on its board, people like Walton, plus active members like Bryan Rackley, co-owner of Atlanta's Kimball House restaurant as well as the Southern-oyster-centric Watchman's Seafood and Spirits, and one of the industry's most vocal champions. In addition to their bivalve boosting day jobs, the duo is always up for some farmed oyster evangelism at events like the annual Oyster Cook-Off

Top: Dr. Bill Walton, aka Dr. Oyster, associate professor and extension specialist at Auburn University's School of Fisheries.
Bottom Freshly harvested oysters waiting to be sorted.

IN THE SOUTH, FARMERS ARE ALL RAISING THE SAME SPECIES, SO EACH OYSTER'S DIVERSE CHARACTERISTICS ARE CREATED BY THEIR LOCATION AND THE UNIQUE MAKEUP OF THE WATER THEY GROW IN.

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in Gulf Shores each November, using any opportunity to educate folks on what oyster farming is. "The Southern farmed oyster is still a new thing," Rackley says. He's spent the morning sampling oysters of all kinds from all over, wild and farmed, cooked and raw, and reaffirmed his conviction that the Southern farmed oyster holds its own in any comparison. "They definitely belong on the tray at Kimball House with the big names from the West Coast and Northeast," he says. "I'm just excited to be a part of what isn't even a renaissance of the Southern oyster but really the birth of a new industry." Walton echoes Rackley. "The idea of farmed oysters and Southern farmed oysters is still new to many consumers," he said. "Without places like Kimball House, Fisher's here in Alabama and others deciding to serve the oysters, charge a premium for them and take the time to explain why, we wouldn't be where we are."

Oyster South is also connecting farmers and giving them a forum to discuss problems and share solutions. Walton stresses that oyster farming has been done successfully, safely and sustainably for years in other areas. "I'm confident we'll get past any issues that arise because there are so many positives that come from oyster farming, and the fans we have made are passionate," he says, "It's like a cult."

To draw more devotees into the half-shell herd, Oyster South is hosting events designed to foster oyster-farmer and oyster-eater fellowship. Walton's energy level approaches jubilant when he talks about what these particular efforts accomplish. "Take a new oyster farmer. They come to one of these events, and they start seeing that there's a chef that really gives a damn, that actually cares and is interested in an oyster having a nice deep cup and really plump meat," he says. "And they realize 'You'll pay me what for it?' That is a completely different dynamic. It's exciting."

And it has to be. For the oyster farming industry to really live up to that term, forging a chain that links committed suppliers to an educated demand has to be long and strong. The farmers, the wholesaler, the restaurant, the customer: They all have to understand the whole story. "If you don't know, you can't care, and then you might not buy these oysters," Walton says. "They're not cheap. You are buying them because, No. 1, they taste great, but also because you know the work and pride that went into them. That is what Oyster South is really about, bringing that awareness." Oyster South events, like last fall's Landlocked in Atlanta, also let farmers meet customers and get face-to-face feedback. "It's a long day on the water, so it's rewarding for them to see that their labor does matter to someone else," Walton says.

Hard Day's Work

"Urgh. This line is loose again." Pollock is waist-deep in the rippling, olive-green waters of Caminada Bay, wading among the more than 300 mesh bags of oysters on his farm, pulling pliers out of his shirt pocket to re-secure the slacking cord. He keeps talking while tightening, hints of a slow Louisiana drawl chipping away at the chirpy cadence of his Canadian upbringing. "It's a lot to look after. You have to come out here and keep the bags clean, check the lines, divide the bags as the oysters get bigger so they don't crowd each other out." He unfastens a bag and heads to his boat, where his wife helps haul in the heavy load. "This can wreck your shoulders," he says. On shore, he cuts the zip ties holding one end closed and empties mature oysters onto a metal table. He plucks a feisty blue crab out and tosses it in a bucket. "Bad crab," he scolds. "These guys will eat the oysters, but we're nice. I'll put him back in the bay." He keeps sorting oysters, pushing smaller ones to one side and pulling a few with open shells out. "These are dead, so they're trashed. The littler ones go back in the water to grow a bit bigger." He brandishes one: "Look at this, the shape of its shell; that's as deep a cup as you're ever gonna see."

Top: Scooping seed to stock into mesh bags destined for the farm.
Bottom Left: Tossing baskets of harvest ready oysters from the water to the barge at Murder Point Oysters.
Bottom right: Deserted houseboat on the waterway.

At Triple N, everyone's in on the work and the rewards. The Pollocks' 5-year-old daughter Megan slurps down oysters like it's her job. "Give me a good shuck, daddy. No shell," she instructs. "Yes, ma'am," Steve says as he slides the stubby blade of his oyster knife between a bivalve's tight shells. He hands it to her, and it's gone, lickity split. The mature mollusk that passed through Megan's mouth was, mere months ago, a tiny baby oyster; in aquaculture jargon, they're called seed.

There are multiple requirements for raising oysters, but seed oysters are No. 1 on the list and are produced in specialized facilities called hatcheries. Walton oversees one at the AU Shellfish Lab; Roberts has got one at his spot in South Carolina; Murder Point's hatchery put out its first seed in mid-2018; and Triple N has a hatchery too. The last three supply seed for themselves and other area farms. Pollock believes his nursery will become the real money-maker for his aquaculture business. At all, the process is essentially the same.

Mature oysters are brought into the hatchery, and each one is placed alone in a small tank where they'll spawn. Males spit out sperm; females saturate their water with eggs. The two components for life are mixed, and reproduction takes place. In about a day, the fertilized eggs become barely visible new oysters. They're moved into much larger tanks and fed phytoplankton. They grow, and at this point they actually swim freely; in a week or so, they'll be moved to another batch of tanks and attach to a miniscule piece of ground-up oyster shell and never move of their own volition again. "All oysters 'set,' on shell or some structure," Walton says. "That's what creates oyster beds. In hatcheries, we're having each of them set on their own speck of shell so we can keep them individual."

At this stage, seed oysters are kept in what's called a nursery, where they're still tended to, but not as closely. Here, they're bathed in seawater that's pumped into their tanks and allowed to nourish themselves by pulling food from the water, just as they'd do in the wild. "The only difference is that we are maximizing their chance for survival by keeping the water temperature steady, and, of course, there are no predators in the tanks," Walton says.

There are several commercial nurseries in Southern coastal communities serving Southern oyster farms. At a marina in Pensacola, Florida, Doug Ankersen tends to the nursery that he started in summer 2017 with owner of the Pensacola Bay Oyster Co. farm, Don McMahon. Ankersen has been in the nursery biz since 2013, helping

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SALT IS A KEY FLAVOR IN OYSTERS, BUT NOT DETECT BRIGHT EVERGREEN, CREAMY SWEETNESS,

Top left: Donnie McMahon,owner of Pensacola Bay Oyster Co. takes us out on the bay to his oyster farm. **Top right** Farm raised raw Southern oysters at Fisher's Dockside in Orange Beach **Bottom left:** Oyster Barn restaurant sitting on the water at Bayou Texar in Pensacola **Bottom right** A bottle nursery upweller where oyster seed are raised to a size ready for the farm.

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THE ONLY ONE. A TRUE CONNOISSEUR CAN
CITRUSY ZING AND/OR A SHARP MINERAL FINISH.

Above: Beth Walton, Executive Director of Oyster South, helps Johnathan York of Pensacola Bay Oyster Co. separate oysters during harvest at their Magnolia Bluff oyster farm.

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(continued)

Left: Bill Briand, Executive chef of Fisher's Upstairs in Orange Beach, puts the finishing touch on grilled oysters. **Center left:** Fisher's Upstairs, located at the Marina at Orange Beach, AL

"THE IDEA OF SOUTHERN FARMED OYSTERS

Alabama's oyster farmers in their fledgling stages with his Double D nursery on Mobile Bay. The Pensacola nursery is using a new-and-improved method of Ankersen's own design, a configuration that earned him grant money to build it. Boxes are secured to the underside of a floating dock and fitted with pumps that push gallons of water through them, bathing baby oysters in a constant stream of food to keep them growing. The portability of this system is key. "We want to keep the salinity at a certain level, and freshwater inflow, like rain, can change that," he says, his body swaying with the undulating dock. "With this, we can pick up and move our apparatus if conditions here become unfavorable."

Soon, seed oysters are ready to go to farmers who'll grow them to maturity and put their personal touches on that process. At each step – from hatchery to nursery to farm – the depth of scientific knowledge needed goes down, but the degree of physical labor ramps up.

Deborah Keller, started raising her "Oyster Mom" oysters on her 1.5 acre farm in Oyster Bay in Wakulla County, Florida, in 2016, and the 63-year old does a lot of the work herself, including harvesting, which means dragging heavy bags of oysters over the side of her boat and carrying those bags from the dock to her bayside house. "It can be intense," she says. "But I'm pretty strong, and I feel that the work has strengthened my entire body." She does yoga to stay flexible and has grown used to the toll the work takes. She wiggles her fingers: "My hands look pretty rough," she says, "I was kinda embarrassed by them, but I'm over it. I sure don't bother with manicures anymore."

And it's not just physically rigorous. Like all farmers, oyster farmers will never be able to control or completely protect against factors like severe weather and predators, meaning the chance of major crop loss is a constant threat.

For The Future

The risks are real, but so are the reasons to get into oyster farming. Yet they're as diverse as the oysters each farmer turns out. For some, like Jay Styron of Carolina Mariculture on Cedar Island, North Carolina, the pursuit is an ongoing adventure. He began raising his Cedar Island Selects in 2008, looking to expand the side venture into something to occupy him when he retires from director of Marine Operations at The University of North Carolina Wilmington. Ask him what drew him to it, and he'll likely quip, "Stupidity," but quickly follows that with, "It's really fun on the good days, and the good days outnumber the bad."

A thin competitive streak peeks out when he starts talking about oysters from other areas. "When I first started, only two other folks were even playing with it here, but it was going crazy in Virginia," he says. "I thought, 'Shoot, if they can do it there, I know we can grow some world-class oysters here.'" Judging by his farm's longevity, he is. Hailed for a meaty bite and a sweet, mid-salinity flavor, Styron's oysters reflect their habitat. "We're not super salty like some down on the Gulf, but we've got more salt than those growing right at river mouths," he says. Part of his enjoyment comes from pleasing customers. "It's real fun to see others get pleasure eating our oysters," he says. "I never get tired of that."

For Keller, it's a way to live out her conservation philosophy. Working for the Nature Conservancy, she helps the non-profit fulfill its mission, and she sees her oyster farm as an extension of that. "Oysters are ecosystem engineers," she says. "They filter the water. They provide incredible habitat for everything else in the bay. Oyster farming is a way to bring back a cornerstone species here."

"Here" is a section of the sunshine state that's still relatively unspoiled. Wakulla County contains almost 400 square miles of nature preserves including the Apala-

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(continued)

Center right: Chef Bill Briand chargrilling local Southern oysters at Fisher's upstairs at Orange Beach. **Right:** Chargrilled Southern oysters ready to serve at Fisher's Upstairs.

IS STILL NEW TO MANY CONSUMERS."

chicola National Forest, St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge and Wakulla Springs State Park. Being surrounded by these protected lands means the area waters are also protected from pollutants. This, combined with almost year round warm water, gives Keller's farm a speed advantage. "This is a truly incredible environment here," she says. "It allows me to have some pretty rapid growth; my current time till harvest is five months."

Keller also relishes the opportunity to be a catalyst to revive an economy. When the nearby Wakulla Environmental Institute was formed, the first course it offered was oyster farming, and Keller joined the advisory board. "They did that because of the decline of the wild oyster population here; they were so severely over-harvested, and the decline has had a real negative impact," she says. "And we are not just talking about oyster tongers, but the transportation systems, the processors, all of it. The oyster aquaculture program was launched to bring an industry back, just in a new way."

With the traditional oyster industry collapsed, and oyster farming a new and unknown concept, Keller felt it would take a few pioneers to prove it worked. "There is a real time and financial commitment to get an oyster farm going, so I figured we'd need some folks willing to really give it their all for this to gain a foothold here," she says. "I wanted to be a part of paving the way."

While off-bottom oyster farming is innovative, for some, it's preserving tradition. The Zirlotts have been pulling their livelihood from the sea for five generations. For decades, they chased shrimp, but in the wake of the massive BP oil spill that fouled the Gulf in 2010, they were looking to take at least a few variables out of the equation and turned to oyster farming. "It gives us a bit more control but keeps us on the water. Water work is all we know," patriarch Brent Zirlott says. "It's who we are."

Like Keller, Styron hopes his work can keep fishing families feeding themselves and bring new families to the trade. "If I can be a part of showing others how to be an oysterman this way, then there is a future for water work here."

And it's work that in some areas is desperately needed. "An entire community benefits from oyster farming. It's good for the environment, and it's good for the economy," Styron says. "We've got a lot of sparsely populated places here with high unemployment, places that other jobs aren't coming to. Start an oyster farm and put even four or five people to work, and that's huge."

Walton agrees. Ensuring the character of coastal areas remains intact – character derived from locals harnessing local resources – is part of oyster farming's appeal for him. "We're creating an industry that keeps people working and provides jobs for new people to get into it, and they're all investing in the health and stewardship of our waters."

Oyster South currently has 35 farmer members spanning Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, South Carolina and North Carolina, but the total number of farmers is larger, with new ones on the way. And there's room in the market for more. "This can get so much bigger; I can barely keep up with my local orders, " Keller says. "We haven't even touched the interior of the United States yet."

To keep the momentum going and get Southern oysters in front of diners in America's heartland, transportation infrastructure is the next step. But awareness is still essential. Folks in Oklahoma first have to know that Southern farmed oysters exist before they get interested in eating them. "That's why Oyster South is so important," Styron says. "When the rest of the country hears about these, I know they'll want them. We've only scratched the surface."

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