



TRANSCRIPT

Episode 4: Growing Oysters in the Gulf of Maine

Narrator: 0:01

You're listening to the sounding line from the Gulf of Maine Research Institute.

Carissa Maurin: 0:19

I'm Carissa Maurin, Aquaculture Project Manager at GMRI. Thanks for joining us. In today's conversation, we're going to hear from two Maine aquaculture farmers about their work. Our guests are Joanna Fogg, co-founder and owner of Bar Harbor Oyster Company. And Ben Hamilton, co-owner and operator of Love Point Oysters. In my work with the Institute, I provide broad support for GMRI's aquaculture initiatives, including implementing growth strategies that support the responsible growth of sustainable aquaculture in the Gulf of Maine. I met Joanne and Ben while conducting interviews for the creation of The Maine Aquaculturist, which is a comprehensive, accessible and practical information portal that assists commercial businesses in understanding and utilizing business relevant aquaculture resources. They have been involved in user testing throughout its design, and continue to provide great feedback. Let's take a listen as Joanna and Ben start by defining what aquaculture is.

Joanna Fogg: 1:17

I define it as farming in the ocean. That's just a very simple working definition for what I do.

Ben Hamilton: 1:26

Yeah, I was an English teacher before I was a farmer. So, I like to pick apart words. And so I look at the word Aquaculture as two parts Aqua, and culture. So, culture means to grow things, and aqua means to grow them in the water. And there's a lot of different things you can grow on the water. Joanne and I just are growing oysters. Do grow other species yet?



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Joanna Fogg: 1:51

We're only trying to grow oysters right now.

Ben Hamilton: 1:53

Yeah, so I was pretty pleased with myself when I made the connection with aqua and culture and agriculture and all that good stuff. But yeah, I think just growing things in the ocean farming things in the ocean, is what it is.

Carissa Maurin: 2:10

And would you guys walk us through a day in the life of working on your farm. So, what aquaculture actually looks like and feels like for you guys on a day-to-day basis.

Joanna Fogg: 2:20

That has changed a little bit over time as I've gotten further and further and just the first three years of growing my almost all of my time was on the water it was before we really had any help. A regular day would be getting my daughter off to care or sometimes bringing her with me and paddling my kayak out to my larger boat and taking my larger boat which was still small, out to our first our limited purpose aquaculture sites and then our lease and handling oysters, flipping oysters, checking oysters, trying to prevent bio fouling. The first couple of years we didn't have a greater before we sell a three year oyster. So there were there were three years where all I did was just try and cultivate oysters, play with shells, see what was going on out there learn more about the actual ecosystem that I was engaging with. And yeah, I spent a lot of time out there. Now my day to day it looks a little bit different because we have a lot of oysters to sell. And we've gone the route of being our own wholesaler. So we distribute all of our product. I'm on the farm almost every day, but typically not full workdays because I'm managing a couple of crew and I'm managing all of the all of our inspections, all of our licenses, all of our leases, all of our sales, and all of our employees, as well as raising a daughter. So, I'm on the water a few hours, at least a day and then and then holding everything else together and trying to pass batons and manage as best I can so that we can have a product that is it's good and we can profit from it and sell it.



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Ben Hamilton: 3:58

It's a largely I think what we're doing, I think we're a year or two behind you in our business development. It's just me and Cameron Varner, my business partner. We have one seasonal intern that we try to source locally from a Maine institution. And yeah, I think being an entrepreneur, the magic of it for me is you never get bored. There's always something that needs to be done. It can be quite stressful at times because of that, but I'd rather err on the side of just having this overwhelming task list and trying to like figure out how to tick away at it. But it's you know, it's we're on the water every day. We I tell people, oyster farming, I boil it down to C cubed. It's Cleaning, Culling, and Counting, you know, you've got to make sure your gear stays really clean so that the oysters which are filter feeders can, can have good flow through the bags where they feed on our farm. And, you know, bags can foul with algae and barnacles and mussels, and all sorts of things that either compete for that algae that the oysters need to eat to thrive, or block the flow of that algae. And then oysters, when we first get them are about the size of the pinky nail, like nine to 13 mil, what size are yours, Joanna, when you get them?

Joanna Fogg: 5:41

We, just last year, we started getting two different seed stock. So, we have an upweller now and we buy about half of our seed in two to four mil and put it in our upweller, and the other half is nine to 13 and goes right down on the farm.

Ben Hamilton: 5:52

Got it? Oh, wow, that's exciting that you have an upweller.

Joanna Fogg: 5:56

Oh, that's fun. Oh, that's fun. I think you're really smart to start with a nine to 13 and, and work up to small seed. It's a learning curve.

Ben Hamilton: 6:04

Yeah, so when we put nine to 13, and it's really small, there's 2000 oysters in a bag. And then when we go to market, we've got about 300 in the bag when they're three inches. And so that's the counting aspect of it, we're always trying to, based on the roster size, make sure there's the right number of oysters in a bag, because if you have too much biomass in a bag that can result in mortality. And then the culling, Cameron doesn't like



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this words, but you call it sorting. That means just getting like sized oysters together so that the larger ones that are more effective at filtering, don't out compete the smaller creatures. So that's kind of the bulk of the farming work that we do. And then yeah, lots of tasks in terms of building our brand, managing sales, figuring out how to move the product safely, you know, trying to be good neighbors and stewards on the water. And yeah, it's fun. I mean, it's like rote manual labor on one hand, and then we're like in QuickBooks trying to figure out like how to build a financial plan and keep the business afloat and be profitable. It's really, we're finding it's, we're in year four of our venture here. And it's, it's not easy to be profitable farming on the water.

Carissa Maurin: 7:22

Yeah, I think one of my favorite quotes to me is that aquaculture is farming. And a lot of people don't realize that when they start up with that, do you want to talk a little bit more about that aspect of it?

Ben Hamilton: 7:35

I think it's I like to joke around it's a, it's a highly irresponsible way to make a living is what there's just so many ways, you can lose your crop. And it just seems with all the natural elements, storms, and natural predation, like starfish and drill snails and boring sponge, and all the other competition out there, it's a constant battle to be successful out there. We're always trying to maximize the yields we get on a crop. So, if we bring in new oysters, what we learned is, if you lose oysters, not only do you not sell those oysters, you make it more expensive, you make the cost of the other oysters that did survive more expensive. And so, it's like a double whammy on your bottom line. And so, we're always just really working hard. And that's kind of the scientific part of it. When you go beyond the physicality of the work. You really have to understand the creatures in your care and their well-being and do everything you can to steward their journey. And so, it's yeah, making the right call at the right time can be really challenging and scientific. And that's when I get excited to have Cameron because he's got a major in biology, I think, some science degree and a master's in aquaculture. And so, he's been very helpful in that regard. But yes, it's, it is farming, and farming is quite, quite challenging, but fun and really rewarding.



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Joanna Fogg: 9:08

I often when I'm talking to people about aquaculture and what we do, I find that I often refer to, I make comparisons with agriculture, to kind of explain things so people maybe understand it and just like has the perspective and helps me understand it too. I didn't grow up with aquaculture, I learned, I'm figuring this out. But if I compare what I grow on the water to a land crop, and not only makes more sense to me sometimes but also to other people. So, when I compare buying different size seeds, whether it's a two to four mill or a nine to 13 Mill, I sometimes use a comparison that it's like buying a seed versus buying a seedling and how the seedling is more expensive, but it's a lot more likely to survive. And so that's that investment or when I talk about flipping our cages to prevent biofouling. It's like that's weeding our garden like we're getting rid of the things that we can't, you know, that's taking away from the crops that we want to grow, so biofouling is just weeds to me. So, we need to like get, you know, cull that and clean that out. And when I don't have enough product, and you know, everything isn't quite right, it's just, they're not ripe. You know, you don't want to sell an unripe tomato like you want it to be that way. So using those kind of, you know, those metaphors for aquaculture, I think helps people understand like, okay, they're just not ripe yet. Or like, oh, she's weeding her garden. And it kind of makes sense. And it makes me feel better, like I'm doing something, right. Because people understand agriculture people, I mean, to some extent, and romanticize it, and it's just, we, we get that it's food systems, and we understand it on different scales. And I think a lot of people still have, you know, are just new to the idea of aquaculture at least in Maine or with oysters. And so, the more I can understand it in terms of agriculture, I like I like the translation and kind of applying those things.

Carissa Maurin:

Do you have any advice for people who are interested in agriculture starting off, do it.

Joanna Fogg: 11:02

Do it.

Ben Hamilton: 11:03

That's exactly what I was going to say, just do it. Please, please do it, figure out how to make it work.



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Joanna Fogg: 11:09

Don't be afraid to talk to people, you'll get better at it. And like, really, it I mean, just just to kind of reiterate what we've been saying, like, it's, there's a lot of hard work, like, you're gonna have bad days. But like, we really are a pretty strong community of people who are out here doing stuff and who want more people to be doing it, we believe wholeheartedly in it. I mean, no one is out to sea farm to make a fast buck. Like, that's just not doesn't, it doesn't happen. So, you know, if, if you're interested in doing it and working hard and you know, doing something that you can get behind, then, you know, there are networks, there are so many networks of people who who can help you and, and I do think this is the future of food production, as well as food systems. And yeah, there will be a lot of challenges. But there also are a lot of support networks.

Ben Hamilton: 12:04

Yeah, and in the spirit of just doing it. I think you really just have to actually get started some, some were somehow, try to put some gear in the water or join another farm that's seeking help or volunteer to help somewhere, you just have to take that you have to put your toe in the water, you just have to like, make that little leap of faith. We talk a lot, Cameron and I, about this universe of pure potentiality that's out there. And I'm amazed, like if you just make the choice to move in a certain direction. The world opens up to you in these ways that I never could have even imagined. It's very hard to articulate like what this means. Other than maybe Joanna can elaborate I see you nodding I feel like there's there's like traction here. But it really is kind of amazing. You get started and the ball starts rolling and you just figure things out as you go, and opportunities present themselves.

Joanna Fogg: 13:08

Things grow. Yeah, I mean, the world is your oyster. I think it's what I was smiling about. Like it really it's true. Like you can't I can't I am not a scientist I cannot describe how oysters actually exist and filter and, and how they do what they do without brains like it is magic. And there's you know, there's, you know, we come from the water like there's magic and that is kind of like coming home and yeah, if you put yourself out there, you will be received and things will grow and things will happen. And yeah, it's a beautiful thing to be a part of.



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Carissa Maurin: 13:47

That was Joanna Fogg co-founder and owner of Bar Harbor Oyster Company. And Ben Hamilton, co-owner and operator of Love Point Oysters talking about aquaculture. I'm Carissa Maurin Aquaculture Project Manager at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute.

Narrator: 14:07

The Sounding Line is a production of the Gulf of Maine Research Institute. And you can find more episodes and read more about our work at gmri.org. Thanks for listening.