For one man, oyster industry thrives again

Just as efforts from the state began to bloom, the industry faces negative publicity from the sickening of two people in Virginia.

By MARICARMEN RIVERA
Staff Writer, (609) 794-5114

COMMERCIAL TOWNSHIP — Saving the oyster industry will take more than one man's faith. But for Samuel Holmes, the industry is on its way to better times.

In an area that once was considered the "Oyster Capital of the World," Holmes' restaurant — Shellpile Restaurant and Raw Bar — stands as one of the few in the area where seafood is offered and oysters are served.

"Some five years ago, they had some kind of disease, but it is not impacting our business," Holmes said. "The sales are extremely good."

That disease was a parasitic disease called MSX, and it nearly decimated the oyster industry in the late 1950s. Years later, the industry came across another parasite called Dermo. Years after that, the state started several programs to save the industry and help oystermen along the New Jersey shore, especially the ones along the Delaware Bay.

Now, as the seeds of those efforts are starting to bloom, the industry faces another problem. It recently was announced that oysters harvested from the Delaware Bay are responsible for sickening two people in Virginia.

In both instances, two Virginia residents were sickened by Vibrio parahaemolyticus, a bacteria that occurs naturally along the coast.

Fortunately for Holmes, he has received no complaints regarding the oysters he is serving.

"I've never had any complaints with the oysters," Holmes said.

Holmes serves raw and Rockefeller-style oysters in his restaurant. The raw oysters are not opened until served. The oysters Rockefeller are baked with a mixture of spinach, onion, Worcester sauce and cheese. Raw oysters, Holmes said, are sold for 75 cents each.

He gets his oysters from Bivalve Packing Co., which is around the corner from his restaurant.

In Commercial Township, the demand for oysters remains high, according to Samuel Holmes, owner of the Shellpile Restaurant and Raw Bar.

Staff photo by Dele Gerhard

Steve Fleetwood, general manager for the company, said oystermen are trying to save the industry. But, he said, the efforts are harder when they have to deal with negative publicity.

"We are trying to do something positive," Fleetwood said. "We are doing all we can do. We just haven't had these problems before."
Oysters
(Continued from Page C4)

The Delaware Bay Section of the state Shellfisheries Council recently decided to impose stricter oyster-handling practices on harvesters during warm weather.

Harvesters now can begin their work an hour earlier, at 6 a.m., to facilitate getting the bivalves back to the dock before the heat of the day. This, and other efforts, are aimed at keeping the oysters cold.

“They are doing this voluntarily,” Fleetwood said. “We’ve been coming in early and trying to make sure we don’t have a problem.”

For some people, however, efforts to save the industry are futile.

Leo Robbins was having shrimp at the Shellpile Restaurant on Sunday.

He eats oysters and said he particularly enjoys oyster stew.

But his knowledge of oysters goes far beyond a culinary one.

He worked as manager for Robbins Bros., a Port Norris-based oyster company that is no longer in business. The problem with the industry, he said, goes far beyond recent negative stories.

“There is no oyster industry here compared to what it used to be,” Robbins said. “High levels of salt in the bay caused the oysters to die.

“New Jersey started supplying New York City with millions of gallons of water a day,” Robbins said. “It drained the bay. The salt water took over the bay and these oysters could not survive.”

High prices, difficulties in harvesting and lack of infrastructure, Robbins said, will make it impossible for the industry to recover.

“In the 1940s, there were 400 boats here,” Robbins said. “Where will the capital come from to rebuild the boats? I don’t think it will recover.”

Meanwhile, Holmes will continue to serve oysters in his restaurant. He is as proud of his recipe as he is of the area’s history.

“The industry,” he said, “is coming back.”