New Jersey, Once Home to a Thriving Shellfish Industry, Uses Advanced Growing Techniques to Boost Delaware Bay's Output

By

Heather Haddon

Updated Jan. 27, 2013 9:50 a.m. ET

Worker Jose Arias hauls a bag of oysters at southern New Jersey's Cape Shore Flats last October. Harvests have improved since the 1990s. Emile Wamsteker for The Wall Street Journal

New Jersey was once home to a booming oyster industry, as evidenced by the Victorian mansions along Cape May erected by fishing barons and coastal communities such as Bivalve and Shell Pile that took their names from the plentiful natural resource lining Delaware Bay.
"In the heyday, they were shipping 20 boxcars of oysters a day," said Douglas Fisher, the state secretary of agriculture.

Disease, overaggressive fishing and other factors eventually crippled the industry in the 1950s and again in the 1990s. But New Jersey oysters are rebounding through advances in growing techniques, increased demand and a new push from the state to drive economic activity in some of its poorest counties.

Watch

Video: From Consulting to Oyster Farming

After harvesting an annual average of 36,600 bushels in the 1990s, fishermen had a banner year in 2011, when 95,000 bushels were landed, though that number dipped last year to 78,000.

The industry is concentrated in the Delaware Bay, northwest of Cape May. The shallow bay's nutrients and water flow help make the oysters plump, sweet and briny, restaurateurs and oyster harvesters say. Other Eastern oysters are found in places such as Maine, the Chesapeake Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, while Pacific oysters are harvested in Washington and Oregon.

Much of the shellfish is bought by canneries and have yet to become menu mainstays, in part, restaurant owners say, because New Jersey's reputation has faded as a provider of fresh shellfish,
even in its own region. "I've never heard of them," Rebecca Charles, owner of New York City's Pearl Oyster Bar, said of New Jersey's offerings.

That reputation, however, may be changing.

"Once people have them, they become fan favorites," said Krystof Zizka, co-owner of Maison Premiere in Brooklyn. "Unfortunately, there's some skepticism initially."

Cape May Salts, a brand sold by large New Jersey producer Atlantic Capes Fisheries, are served in New York restaurants such as Maison Premiere and Telepan on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "These are perfectly balanced," said Bill Telepan, the restaurant's owner. "Customers will call me out and say these oysters were terrific."

John Merendino, owner of Madison Seafood, a Newark wholesaler, sells as many as 3,000 Cape May Salts each week to high-end New Jersey restaurants, though that pales in comparison with the number of the better-known Long Island Blue Points he sells, about 20,000 weekly.

Oyster harvesting generates nearly $4 million for local growers, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection. Officials say oystering generates $20 million in economic activity—the ripple effects beyond direct sales.

In the early 20th century, Delaware Bay produced more than a million bushels of oysters a year, but began tapering off in the 1930s and was down to 49,000 in 1960. Since the mid-1990s, with the introduction of a quota system that limits the amount of oysters that could be harvesters, the annual haul has rebounded to an average of 72,000 bushels in the past 10 years.

In some ways, the most recent push for New Jersey oysters can be dated to the early 1990s, when the industry was struck by the parasitic shellfish disease known as Dermo, which didn't affect humans. "It was a crisis point. The industry was going to collapse," said David Bushek, director of Rutgers University's Haskin Shellfish Research Laboratory, in Port Norris, N.J.

Among the first actions: a quota system in 1995 to limit the harvest and ease the pressure the oyster fleet was putting on the dwindling population of shellfish.

Next, New Jersey passed legislation in 1997 to develop shellfish aquaculture—a technique in which larvae are raised in nurseries, then transferred into the open waters to mature. With traditional harvesting, fishermen use large metal rakes towed by boats to dredge up wild oysters embedded along the bay bottom.

Aquaculture techniques produce more uniform oysters, allowing growers to charge more for them on the half-shell market. The method also makes the industry less vulnerable to fluctuations in wild oyster populations and natural disasters.

More recently, the federal government, along with Delaware and New Jersey, tried to improve the wild-shellfish habitat by dropping millions of clam shells into the bay, which helps oysters mature by giving the larvae something to attach to.
Oyster aquaculture has "gone from an experimental phase to selling $1.4 million oysters thus far this year," said Brian Harmon, oyster farm manager of Atlantic Capes Fisheries, which for now sells Cape May Salts from Washington, D.C., to New York. That is up from $750,000 total in 2011.

Oyster harvesters are cautiously optimistic about aquaculture. "It’s been good for me," said Barney Hollinger, owner of Elder Point Oyster Co. of Port Norris, who started practicing aquaculture in 2007 after decades of wild fishing. "It's definitely keeping people in business and keeping people working."

Write to Heather Haddon at heather.haddon@wsj.com