Marc Zitter enjoyed a special plate of oysters at the Washington Inn in Cape May last weekend. They were his, grown on the tidal flats of the lower Delaware Bay and among the first he has sold to restaurants since leaving his job as a heavy-equipment operator 18 months ago to become an oyster farmer.

"The display on the plate was pretty awesome," Zitter, who just three weeks ago started selling his oysters under the brand Salty Lady, said in an interview Thursday. "It was nice to see, like I finally made it."
Zitter, 43, is part of a slowly and quietly emerging oyster-farming industry along the Delaware Bay, where oysters were nearly wiped out in the second half of the 20th century by disease and pollution.

Since the late 1990s, Atlantic Capes Fisheries Inc. has been growing a disease-resistant strain of oysters developed by a Rutgers University scientist. They are sold from Massachusetts to Virginia as Cape May Salts.

But more recently, small growers are stepping into chest-high waders and strapping black mesh bags of oysters to racks pounded into the ever-shifting sandbars that stretch a quarter-mile from shore and are exposed at low tide and covered at high tide by five feet of water.

In addition to Atlantic Capes and Zitter, there are now five other oyster farmers on a roughly three-mile stretch of shoreline just north of the Villas in Cape May County.

"I would love to support these guys," said Sam Mink, who buys oysters for the Oyster House on Sansom Street in Center City but had only heard of Cape May Salts in June, when he went on a tour of the oyster farms sponsored by Fair Food, a Philadelphia group that promotes a regional food economy.

"To have a local oyster that we're proud of the way the New Yorkers have theirs coming out of the Great South Bay and Long Island Sound" would be great, Mink said. "We can have a great oyster coming out of the Delaware Bay and be proud of it."

Mink said that farm-raised oysters dominate the market now and are more expensive. "My cost could be anywhere from 60 cents to $1 for a farm-raised oyster, whereas a wild oyster could cost me 35 cents," he said.

Cape May Salts and Betsy's Cape Shore Salts, both from the Delaware Bay, will have a chance to test themselves against oysters from both coasts of North America on Sept. 20 at the Reading Terminal Market's OysterFest.

The event will have oysters from places on the East Coast stretching from Virginia to Prince Edward Island and on the West Coast from California and British Columbia, according to David Braunstein, of Pearl's Oyster Bar, at 1136 Arch St.

Michael Craig, owner of Washington Inn, where Zitter experienced the joy of eating his own oysters in a fine restaurant, said the demand for local oysters was strong.

"People come in and they ask for the Cape May Salts. That's taken a number of years to develop for them," Craig said.

"The Salty Lady, I think it's a very good name," Craig said, "because the salty profile of an oyster is one that many oyster aficionados benchmark as higher quality."

But the nascent industry is not without challenges.
Mudworms are one of the biggest, said Lisa Calvo, an aquaculture extension program coordinator for Rutgers.

Mudworms form spaghettilike strands on the surface of the oyster shells, trapping particles from the water that turn into slimy mud that can suffocate the oysters if it is not removed.

"It's a tough nut to crack," said Calvo, who has a research grant this year to study the worms.

Another challenge is getting big enough as an oyster-growing region to have a significant market presence. To help achieve that goal, six of the seven commercial growers on the lower Delaware Bay have been working to form a marketing cooperative.

That could help the farms grow more quickly by sharing expenses for distribution, marketing, and back-office functions, Calvo said. They could also more easily apply for grants and develop the scientific knowledge to boost production, she said.

But it has been difficult to get the cooperative off the ground, in part because the process of building trust among growers has been slow, said Betsy Haskin, who markets her oysters as Betsy's Cape May Salts and is a small grower and a big proponent of the cooperative. Her father, Harold H. Haskin, developed the disease-resistant oyster grown in the bay. He died in 2002.

"It's a matter of figuring out how we are going to move along together, the big and the small," Haskin said. "We don't want to get smothered by them, and they don't want to get held back by us."

For now, Haskin is working closely with Zitter, sharing a dealer's license, for example, so they can deliver directly to restaurants, instead of going through a distributor.

"We're practicing," she said.

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