From the Mouth of the Bay
Milford Oyster Festival Perspectives

Recently I had a chance to chat with Ian Duthie, a grower and industry advocate from Tasmania, Australia, while we were shucking oysters at the Milford Festival. He was here on a Nuffield Scholarship that has him traveling around the globe looking at shellfish-farming practices in search of innovations that might have applications “Down Under.”

On his way to France Ian wrote up an entertaining piece for our newsletter describing his impressions of the Milford Oyster Festival. He makes some great observations about shellfish marketing that I hope you’ll take the time to read. Ian points out that (at least for oysters) we need to think more in terms of “selling the experience” than “selling a meal.”

To connect with consumers you need to tell them about your farm, your “way of life” and your waters. Raw-bar visitors want to have a friendly, knowledgeable shucker who can tell them about the product and regale them with bawdy jokes. The typical raw-bar customer cares less about the product than we oyster snobs do; gobs of cocktail sauce and horseradish mask the experience for them. But they relish the cachet and the thrill of trying something a little risky.

I also asked Ian about his impressions of our industry – what we could learn from him and what he thought we were doing wrong (or right). Here are some excerpts: “Given your population, your water resources and your heritage, I think your industry is in a prime position to expand. Your work with ECSGA is essential to stop the loss of growing areas, and explain the industry’s needs to government officials and regulators.”

“The level of governmental support for extension and the work Stan Allen is doing at ABC, (both the ploidy and breeding programs) is also critical to the industry’s future. We don’t have extension services in Australia, but we enjoy an industry-funded breeding program with 15 generations of families, and I recently initiated a ‘scholarship’ for university students and a leadership program for industry participants.”

“The challenges we face are similar, with a largely apathetic grower community and a government that wants to regulate every aspect of our activities. We need to educate the population to simply maintain our ‘social’ license to exist.”

“I think your hatchery systems are good, but there are real opportunities to make solid gains in production processes. The nurseries are great, simple and look to be very cost-effective. Your grow-out systems are a mixed bag, but then we don’t have to worry about ice in Tasmania. Our grow-out is very different in some ways, but so is the industry supply chain and ‘perceived’ market requirements – I can’t say you should adopt our processes, because your economic, social and regulatory environment is very different.”

I hope one day to travel to Tasmania to see what we can learn from our colleagues “Down Under.”
Pro growers know that the top of the water column is where the highest concentration of microorganisms can be found, making it the ideal depth to maximize oyster growth. To keep our babies in the best feeding zone, early technology utilized the “noodle” or styrofoam blocks for floating individual bags. They did work, but the top of the water column is also where the maximum fouling occurs. Flipping helped the bags clear, but there was still the problem of growth on the shells. Extensive time and labor is involved for growers to prep the bags for the wintering-over conversion; having to remove, handle and store the floats ate into profits. It was a start in surface culture, but better things were on the way.

Mr. Rhea Savoie, owner of Bouctouche Bay Industries in New Brunswick, Canada, understood the problem. Working with local growers he devised, perfected and invested time and money in the floating grow-out product we now know as the OysterGro™. What follows is a quick overview of some of the time-tested design features Savoie incorporated in the complete growing system.

Looking something like a capsized pontoon boat, in the growing position the system's cage holds the oysters in six grow-out bags at the apex of the water column. The bags are contained in American-made, hot-dip-galvanized, vinyl-coated Aquamesh® grid, and the cages are fabricated in Canada by Bouctouche Bay Industries, or in the U.S. by Ketcham Supply Corp., New Bedford, Mass. The two blow-molded floats have a combined buoyancy of about 300 pounds and are secured to the cage using eight-gauge strands (think shopping cart wire) for superior strength and durability. Fasteners are marine-grade aluminum clips, long-proven in the building of lobster traps.

**The Growing Process**

Seed is placed in the system directly from the upwellers in spat bags fastened to 1" x 1" vinyl-coated-wire-mesh panels to hold their shape in the cages, resulting in early-on quick growth. An incidental and huge benefit of the OysterGro™ system is that continual movement due to wave action bounces the oysters against each other, resulting in a cleaner end-product. The mini-collisions knock back the flutes of the shell, promoting the highly desirable deep cup from the earliest stages of growth. B&B Shellfish of Wareham, Mass. reports bringing diploids to market in 13 months, with their buyer paying premium prices and begging for more product.

**Wintering Over**

The floats have a threaded cap at each end. To overwinter, simply unscrew them, throw them in a tote, and the hollow floats fill with water and submerge your OysterGro™ in the cleaning position. Finished. The floats act as feet to keep your oysters away from bottom predators. In springtime just reverse the process: drain the water, replace the caps and you’re back in business. When Hurricane Irene hit in 2011 the Suddards submerged every-thing with zero loss of equipment or product.

Mr Savoie is a strong believer in service and soliciting input from growing companies. OysterGro™ is more than just a name — Continued on page 4
In August I happened to be traveling in the U.S. thanks to a scholarship from the Australian Nuffield Farming Scholars’ Association, whose mission is to promote excellence in all aspects of Australian agricultural production, distribution and management through the adoption of local and international best practices. Dale Leavitt had been hosting me and got me up to Milford so I could help out at the Milford Oyster Festival, and it certainly was an experience. My impression of the festival was that it’s a great interaction with the general public, having obviously grown into more than simply a chance to eat/experience the humble oyster!

Deep-fried Oreos were on offer just across from the best nature provides with oysters! In Australia oysters are either the Pacific oyster or the Sydney Rock (native) or the occasional flat oyster (Ostrea edulis). The oysters are typically sold in the half shell with the meat “flipped.” Oysters are sold to a “processor,” with little opportunity of branding, and are then on-sold to consumers in the half-shell. The processors have been described as using the oysters as a “loss-lead.” Occasionally geographic locations are used in the promotion of the oysters, such as Little Swanport/Coffin Bay (dreadful name for oysters) or Port Stephens.

We once had a fruit and vegetable distributor named Richard Bovill give a presentation to our annual oyster growers’ conference in Tasmania. He had led a “tractor” rally in Canberra, our nation’s capital, campaigning for farmers’ rights, and he captivated the local growers by saying “you aren’t selling food! You’re selling an experience! Eating oysters it’s a bit like sky diving! You know you’re in for an experience of your life, but you’re not quite sure how it will end!”

Shucking oysters at the Milford Oyster Festival was a bit the same! What a great bunch of passionate oyster folk! We had a fantastic variety of product to offer the public, lots of choice, lots of oysters to open! (I’m in France as I write this and the blisters have just healed).

The Eastern oysters (Crassostrea virginica) taste great, with a lovely sweet adductor. The number of oyster types on offer was mind-blowing, and this highlighted the experience for me, as people queued for over ten minutes, only to wait even longer for the “professional” shuckers to free the oysters from the shell!

It was certainly the experience that they were paying $2 per oyster for! (that’s like 5 cents Aussie with the exchange rate?) The triploid oysters were great this time of year, but in Australia the shell fragility and mud worm would have left the oysters in the waste basket at the processors; also the diploid oysters were all but spawned out! The surprise for me was that the public was completely unaware of the fact they were eating “spawned-out water-bags” (I don’t mean offence here, but many were not in the best condition), yet they loved them, coming back for multiple servings and even referring to the difference in sweetness or taste between the different “brands.”

The patrons loved the choice that was on offer. Although all the oysters were the same species, the differentiation of grower and region was exceptional, with nearly everyone deciding they needed to taste at least two of each region before they came back for more!

I was enthralled by the diversity of the oyster-eating public, with many young ladies encouraging their partners to join them in the oyster feast! I must admit I “gave” a few free oysters away to young children – insisting they put a little lemon on them first.

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**OysterGro™ System**

growers to tweak the system for a more profitable experience. This past August he brought the president of the company that molds the floats out to Bill Mook’s hatchery and farm in Maine so he could better understand the end-user’s experience, as well as the importance of Savoie’s extremely high standards. There is support on the [www.Oystergro.com](http://www.Oystergro.com) website in the form of a downloadable Excel file that gives a basic overview of the financial requirements to get going with the OysterGro™.

Some areas are not suitable for the system simply because it does float and can be seen. Local politics and resistance to anything new may result in permitting problems in developed areas. Be certain you have all your permitting ducks in a row first.

The system requires attention to prevent overcrowding, as development is faster than experienced growers are used to and the units get heavy fast. Some farmers complain they are too heavy. The answer for those folks is coming in the form of the new OysterGro Mini™ – a unit designed to use four grow-out bags rather than the standard six. The floats and holding cage are smaller, making the system easier to handle. The care in the design and production of the mini promises to provide the industry with another top-notch product.

“My family has been growing oysters for five generations, and over the course of all those years, I believe we have tried every conceivable method to produce a fast-growing, high-quality oyster. The OysterGro™ system is by far the best we have ever seen. If I had to give up this system I’d quit! Thanks Again,

Ben Suddard

B&B Fish, Wareham, Mass.”

While the Oystergro™ system may not be perfect, it has over the past ten years proven to be an efficient money-maker for those folks who are willing to put in the time needed to get the system functioning properly.

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If you haven’t joined the ECSGA e-mail ListServ yet you’re missing out on lots of timely news and information.

It’s free and easy to get started. Just click on the [Join ListServ](http://www.ECSGA.org) button on the homepage of [www.ECSGA.org](http://www.ECSGA.org) and follow the directions.

The volume of posts is not overwhelming and the list is our primary conduit for delivering important news, grant information and action alerts to our members.
This year for the first time, the Northeast Aquaculture Conference & Exposition will join forces with the Milford Aquaculture Seminar and the International Conference on Shellfish Restoration to hold a joint meeting at the Mystic Marriott Hotel & Spa in Groton, Conn., December 12-15.

Meeting organizers have worked hard to come up with an exciting program guaranteed to appeal to a wide variety of interests. Whether you’re a commercial aquaculturist, researcher, restoration manager or educator, you’ll find something to pique your interest – at an affordable registration fee. With a variety of field trips, an industry trade show, workshops and forums, plenary sessions and well over 100 speaker presentations, there will be something for everyone.

For more information, visit www.northeastaquaculture.org or contact conference coordinator Chris Davis at cdavis@midcoast.com.

A young boy threw back an oyster before I got the lemon juice onto his oyster. He savored it, chewed, then spat, back into the shell (his Dad still ate it!), his face was all screwed up, and I thought that I’d lost a future oyster eater. However his little sister (age 6?) agreed to an oyster with a little lemon – smiles all around! Her brother then, with a little arm-twisting tried again with the lemon. He passed the initiation and was competing with his father for the dozen oysters he had just bought.

The lesson for me was that Richard Bovill was correct with his “You are selling an experience.” The people were lined up and waiting in the hot sun for oysters, because this was an oyster festival and they loved the fact someone else was prying this treasure from the sea out of its shell for them!

An oyster farmer colleague of mine – once an abalone diver, then lawyer – said he farms oysters because they are a “happy food” and what more in life can you want than to make people happy!

That’s what the Milford Oyster Festival represented to me, a “happy place” – living the experience, served up by passionate people who love what they do!

My impressions are that you’re at the start of an amazing journey, with great water, and a public who wants an “experience,” not a meal, and that you’re providing them with just that, lots of choice! They also savor the story of the waterman and the tradition of oystering, along with the positive environmental story. But most of all they are enjoying a food you don’t eat for sustenance, but, like a good wine, for pleasure and the experience! (And maybe the myths are true – oyster eaters love longer?)

My thanks to all at the ECSGA who made this festival possible. I for one certainly enjoyed myself!

Ian Duthie has been involved with shellfish aquaculture in Tasmania, Australia since 1989, and has worked as an oyster farm owner and shellfish researcher at the University of Tasmania. He has also designed and managed shellfish hatcheries for oysters and mussels. Ian can be contacted at ian-duthie@bigpond.com.
Sea scallop aquaculture in the Northeast U.S. seems to be an item of recurring interest, and it's easy to see why. Diversification in crop production is a continual goal for farmers of every stripe, and the sea scallop is a tasty, attractive and well-known bivalve within the ECSGA region. Chefs love them (as do consumers, including this one) and the market – at least for scallop meats from the wild fishery – is well-developed and vigorous.

What follows are some of the How's and Why's of a potential scallop aquaculture sector, some How-to's, and some things to bear in mind when considering the value of such a development, both for the individual producer and for the shellfish aquaculture industry writ large.

**Why and Why Not?**

On the positive side, if you want to see someone light up, talk to a seafood chef about a whole, live or roe-on scallop. These items are precious-difficult to come by, and given the creativity of our culinary community, would be ripe for both the individual producer and for the shellfish aquaculture industry writ large.

Why and Why Not?

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If you accept the broad arguments for scallop culture, and the major caution, then it's time to talk a little about the How.

**Sourcing Seed for the Farm**

Seed sourcing can be an issue, but at least in the Gulf of Maine we have a distinct advantage, one that might extend to waters south of Cape Cod as well, given prior indications. There are two mechanisms to consider: hatchery production or wild spat collection. Hatcheries can provide a measure of control that wild production can’t match: genetics, timing, diseases and pests, costs. On the other hand, there is a long list of attempts at hatchery production, and mostly because of the long larval period for scallops (about 42 days), getting larvae through settlement and then through the nursery is something of a trick. It can be done, but many tries in the U.S. and Canada have failed for a variety of reasons. It is among the more exciting developments in hatchery production that Ferme Marines du Quebec is now in operation; this facility in Chandler, on the Gaspe Peninsula, has been making good headway, and shows as much promise as any attempt made previously.

Spat collection has been quite successful in the Gulf of Maine, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Cape Breton Island, and has shown some promise in waters off Massachusetts. Spat collectors are essentially bags of plastic mesh, about the size of a pillow, and the bag holding the plastic mesh is itself a mesh bag, usually having an opening size of 1.5 mm. Collectors are placed in the path of competent larvae, who then float into the bags, metamorphose, and grow, eventually outgrowing the outer mesh size, and remaining captured. In Maine coastal waters, deployment occurs in September, and bags placed in the lower third of the water column typically do better, in many cases retaining 1,000-3,000 scallops per collector. When retrieved the following May-July, scallops are usually in the 5-20 mm range, although a set of collectors once inadvertently left out for 15 months were

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How Industry Association Membership Can Help Your Business

Last year many of our members filled out a questionnaire developed by Bogdan Prokopovych, and we thought you might be interested in the results. Bogdan was looking at how participation in industry associations impacted business decisions and profitability. Having successfully defended his PhD at the University of Rhode Island’s College of Business Administration, he is about to publish his findings. Bogdan worked with many fishermen and growers associations on the East Coast, and his survey had a 10 percent response rate (157 individuals participating).

Bogdan's findings:

- A positive relationship between increasing levels of trust and association membership. Based on my findings, I argue that industry associations play an important role in firms' decisions to pursue new markets by contributing to creating value and promoting cooperation.
- Shellfishermen who are members of industry associations are more likely to participate in alternative revenue-generating activities…
- Associations are important actors in an organizational field, as they represent the collective action of an industry. Their members participate voluntarily and are driven by benefits that can be obtained only within the community…
- Associations can mobilize their members to achieve certain goals by drawing on their political capacity…
- Finally, association membership matters for building up trust and a sense of community among shellfishermen. This helps foster cooperation, one of the requirements for markets to function.

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Potential for U.S. Scallop Culture

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filled with animals up to 40 mm. Given that the “princess” scallop is a whole/live product being promoted in Canada, and the size for princess scallops runs about 55-75 mm, scallops can come from collectors and be pretty darn close to market size.

Growout

Once you’ve got seed on the farm, there is a whole host of gear possible for growout. My personal opinion is that stable bottom cages will do better than suspension gear such as lantern nets or pearl nets, and we have many designs of bottom cages to choose from. That said, pearl nets and lantern nets are used worldwide, with some farms using them for the sea scallop (Placopecten magellanicus) and also for the other species of scallop under culture. Ear-hanging may be a viable option for scallop culture too, but probably dedicated to meat production – shells will likely foul too much to be considered for a whole/live/roe-on sort of product.

Market and Economics

It remains to be seen what the economics of scallop production will be. Earlier models and estimates used a baseline price of about $5-6 a pound for meats, but meats from offshore are often higher than that presently, and meats from the inshore fishery in Maine have been in the $12-16 range in recent years. With Japanese production at a disadvantage from the Fukushima disaster, and our excellent reputation for inshore scallops, it seems likely that prices for quality product will remain high. However, scallops don’t like to be crowded; lower stocking densities mean more capital equipment and more labor, so the bottom line is a fuzzy picture presently. Earlier work in Maine by Thomas Pottle yielded two marketing runs where a packaged half-shell product brought approximately $1.25 per piece, although it’s unknown where the price will lie under increased volume. Some of my earlier trips into Canada showed some prices around $0.40 per piece, so the best case probably lies somewhere in between.

How to Move Forward

This brings us back to biotoxins, monitoring, and product safety. This is no laughing matter, and will require strong cooperation between farmers and regulatory bodies, so that a framework is developed to ensure product safety, while still working within the needs of the farming enterprise. We do have some models in the U.S. and Canada for such activity, and I feel that with continued work, something feasible will emerge. However, it is clear that site selection will be paramount in the farm-development process, to find locations that are as free of blooms as possible, while meeting the biological and other production requirements. As another personal opinion, I’d argue that a successful scallop business might encompass a land-based facility for short-term storage and staging of live scallops. These facilities would keep scallops out of the natural environment if a certain lot of scallops is being tested for toxin levels, and could help with maximizing shelf life of these sensitive bivalves.

Small steps will win this game: to develop the equipment and husbandry; to develop a robust and reliable monitoring and testing regime; to develop the products, packaging and processing; and to help the markets develop. Rushing won’t help things, and the more brains and ideas that can be brought to the table, the sooner we’ll have another option for growers in the Northeast U.S.

For additional reading, photographs and other resources visit the Maine Sea Grant web site: www.seagrant.umaine.edu/resources-for-shellfish-growers/species/scallop.

Dana Morse is a Marine Extension Associate at the Darling Marine Center in Walpole, Maine. He can be reached at: dana.morse@maine.edu.
## TRAYS

Stacking grow out trays available to you in various stacks made of vinyl coated hot dipped galvanized wire mesh made in the USA by Riverdale Mills, a true marine grade product. You can get them finished and ready to go in the water or we’d be happy to provide them to you as pre-cut flat kits.

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Special thanks to our members for their generous shellfish donations:

- Tonie Simmons, Muscongus Bay Aquaculture Company
- Al Surprenant, Cape Cod Oyster Company
- Skip Bennett and Joe Grady, Island Creek Oysters
- Don Merry, Merry Oysters
- Jeff Gardner, Watch Hill Oyster
- John and Cindy West, Moonstone Oysters
- Jim Arnoux and Nick Papa, East Beach Blondes
- Perry Raso, Matunuck Oysters
- Nancy Follini, Silver Beach Oysters
- Norm Bloom, Cedar Points
- Brian Harmon, Cape May Salts
- Tom Gallivan, Shooting Point Oyster Co.
- Petey Terry, H.M. Terry Co.
- Johnny Shockley, Chesapeake Gold Oysters

2012 Milford Oyster Shucking Contest

— Photo by Marina Huber

Luis Iglesias (left) and Felix Guzman, both of Grand Central Oyster Bar, took second and third place.

— Photo by Marina Huber

Anton Christen of Union Oyster House in Boston walked away with the top prize: $1,000.

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Once again this year, the annual Milford Oyster Festival was a huge success for the association. We sold $46,000 worth of seafood, including 14,000 oysters of 14 varieties and 3,500 clams. Our cooked menu included gallons of clam chowder, fried oysters, fried clam strips and outstanding grilled oysters “Rockefeller” and “Imperial.” We netted over $18,000 for the association coffers, easily besting all previous events. Needless to say, we couldn’t have done it without the generous shellfish donations from many of our members (see box on page 10) or without the help of dozens of volunteers, supporters, members and their spouses, children and friends.

We had a strong showing from the extension community, a large contingent of Rhodes family and friends, and a good turnout of faithful members.

Although we were tormented by rain showers that shortened our Friday evening event and threatened to wash out the whole festival Saturday, the “powers that be” took pity on us and the rains had stopped by 10 am. By noon the sun was shining and the crowds were flocking in. It was a challenge just to keep up with demand as folks waited in long lines to load up on dozens of oysters.

The $1,000 top prize in the shucking contest went to Anton Christen from the Union Oyster House in Boston. Luis Iglesias finished second, winning the $500 prize; while Felix Guzman took the $250 third-place prize (both men hail from the Grand Central Oyster Bar in New York City). Ann Rheault, Gef Flimlin and Richard Rush were our official judges. Marina Huber shot hundreds of great photos that you can see on our Facebook page.

Special thanks for logistical, product and tactical support go out to Phillips Seafood, Cowart Seafood, K & B Seafood, Larry Williams, Briarpatch Enterprises and the Oyster Festival Committee. And the award for superior organizational skills and dedicated service in support of the association goes again this year to Ed and Kathy Rhodes.

Special kudos to all those who came out to help, including: Tom Rossi (grill master) and Marion Ragusa, Gef and Larissa Flimlin, Ann and Sarah Rheault, Graham Brawley and Marina Huber (staff photographer), Dale Leavitt (the shucking professor), Ian Duthie (from Tasmania!) Nick Papa, Bob and Mona Ketcham, Johnny and Nancy Shockley, Thanh Luu, Richard Rush (guest judge), Kenny Shear (the clam machine) and Marcia Douglas, Joseph Meyers, Trisha Kozlozski, Gary Salce and Darlene Rotz.

The professional shuckers, Bob Hastings, Anton Christen, Deborah Pratt, Bob Relyea, Luis Iglesias, Felix Guzman and Pedro Guzman worked all day for the opportunity to compete in the shucking contest. And the crew from K & B, Rene Hernandez, Pedro Mendez, and Tony Eugenio came back for yet another year of fun.

And last, but certainly not least, Kathy and Ed’s friends and family came out in force: Ed Rhodes III, Lauren Murphy, Leslie Smith, Matt Leo, Mihaela Smith, Wendy Leo, Eric Smith, Rosemary Leo, Gregory Leo, Thomas Dalton, Dave Mabius, Kathryn Murphy, Bill Copeland, and Donna Kydes. Thanks particularly to Wendy and Matt for delaying their trip back to Massachusetts to help with the cleanup on Sunday.

We couldn’t have done it without you. Given that all the proceeds of this event help us support the industry, all the association members appreciate your efforts.
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