

Consider the Oyster Farm

Oysters don't need feeding and they don't run away. So why is it so (hilariously) hard to raise them?

by Tamar Haspel December 5, 2011

The bug to farm oysters bites on beautiful summer days, when other bugs – greenflies, no-see-ums – aren't in evidence. The water is calm, the sun is shining, and there are neat lines of oystering gear emerging from the water as the tide flows out. For miles, there's nothing but harbor, spotted with eelgrass islands and bordered by a pristine barrier beach. Bucolic, only with boats. It bit my husband Kevin, hard. His urge to farm dates back to the fourth grade, when Sister Cora asked the class what they wanted to be when they grew up. She thought Kevin was being a wiseass when he said farmer and made him kneel on grains of rice for his insolence. But four decades later, when he met Les Hemmilla, a veteran oysterman who took him out to see the Cape Cod oyster flats, it was all over but the backbreaking labor, uncertain income, and inevitable ruin by disease or mismanagement.



“How hard can it be?” I thought when Kevin brought it up. Farming oysters seemed easier than farming things with roots or legs. They eat what floats by. They're impervious to bad weather. They can't run away. And I sure wasn't going to waste one of my three lifetime marital vetoes to stop him (ask him why he doesn't have a motorcycle). We happened to be in the right place at the right time to get an oyster grant – a lease on a little section of seabed – and we were off and running. Ahead of the game, even, because we already had a boat.

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But really, picking a crop because you think it's going to be low-maintenance is a good indication that you shouldn't be farming in the first place. First, our boat. Boats, it turns out, are as specialized as farm equipment, and you can't farm oysters with your 19-foot fishing boat any more than you can bale hay with your cotton gin.

Ideally, you want oyster flats to be in water shallow enough to go dry for a few hours at low tide, so you can get at your oysters more easily and let the sun kill the various aquatic life forms that foul the gear. But to get to those shallow spots, you need a flat-bottomed boat with a draft in inches. There went our already-have-a-boat advantage. We bought another boat, only to discover that it was too small to carry all the equipment. So, even though our driveway was getting crowded, we bought another, bigger one.

Hey, if oyster farming doesn't work out, we can always invade Britain. It's funny to think how contained, how easy oyster farming can seem, too, when your entire year's crop, called spat in the beginning, arrives by FedEx. Our delivery was a hundred thousand oysters, each the size of a pinhead, a shoebox full of living creatures.

I've never dealt drugs but, as we used a knife to divide our spat into careful, equal portions, I figured it must be a lot like this. We made sure not a single pinhead escaped, and put them into fine-mesh bags to go in the water. So far, so manageable.

You'd expect things that look like rocks to grow slowly but, in our waters, oysters go from pinhead to a legally-harvestable three inches in a little over a year. In the prime growing months of spring and fall, oysters can have perceptible new growth – a translucent white rim on the shell edge – in just a few days.

As an oyster farmer, you can't very well object to your oysters' growing, but it does make them increasingly difficult to deal with. When they're pinheads, a hundred thousand oysters weigh just a few pounds and fit in a dozen bags. By the time they're three inches, they're *seven tons*, divided among 200 trays, spread over half an acre. And along the way, you do *a lot* of hauling them around.

Oysters are filter feeders; they open their shells so water flows through, and they use gills to catch what's edible. They're schmutz eaters, basically. The essence of oyster farming is giving your crop maximum access to water and the schmutz therein, while containing them so they don't drift away or get eaten by predators.

We want our oysters behind mesh with holes just barely smaller than the smallest oyster it has to contain, so water flow is impeded as little as possible. Maximum water flow means maximum food, which means maximum growth. But because oysters grow but mesh doesn't, we spend a lot of time transferring the growing crop to containers with ever-larger mesh, they're finally big enough to thwart predators, at about a year old and two inches long, when go in wire trays the size of a card table.

Although we're growing oysters in conditions that are as close to perfect as nature is likely to give us, it's remarkably easy to screw up. If you don't shake the bags periodically, the oysters start growing together in clusters. If you leave them in bags too long, they won't get enough nutrition and you'll stunt their growth. If you overcrowd

them, they'll turn into strange shapes as they grow out in any direction they can find space. If you let mud build up in the trays, they'll simply die.

So you transfer and you shake and you clean and you transfer again. And you do it when it's raining. You do it when it's cold.

You do it when the greenflies and no-see-ums are there, not just to feast on you, but to laugh at you for deciding to schlep rocks in the sea for a living.

And, if you're Kevin and me, you do it when you're about fifty, well past your prime schlepping years. On a bitter December day, when I'm lifting hundreds of pounds of oyster bags over a gunwale into a boat, farming things with roots or legs starts to look a lot more appealing. Things with roots don't have to be moved, and things with legs can move themselves. Roots and legs aren't farmed in salt water, which, besides being lethally cold in the winter, destroys everything it touches – tools, engines, trailers, pumps. Trucks, even, although only the undersides. Unfortunately, that's where the expensive parts are.

To grow things with roots or legs, you also don't need to wear waders, which, after a brief introductory watertight period, invariably leak, and, as a bonus, make you look like Tweedledum. You don't need to worry about your crop floating off to Portugal if it's not properly secured. You don't have to check a tide chart before you schedule a doctor's appointment.

All things considered, it's hard to figure out why I like it so much.

I'm sure the workplace, one of the most beautiful places on the planet, has something to do with it. And hard work seems to make sense when it's in the service of something constructive like growing food. Getting the rhythm of that work right, side by side with my husband, is gratifying. Even intimate.



And then there are the oysters. Thanks to good conditions, coupled with good advice and good luck, our first crop came up trumps. They're a balance of brine and sweetness and minerality. "The best we've had," our customer, a New York wholesaler serving Manhattan and Brooklyn restaurants, says. We don't take that literally, but it's nice to hear.

Since we moved to Cape Cod three years ago, Kevin and I have tried to get as much of our food as possible first-hand – hunting, gathering, fishing, growing – and I've found that feeding family and friends that way is an accomplishment of an unfamiliar order. It's a primordial satisfaction, the fulfillment of the human evolutionary imperative to sustain ourselves, and it's not like the higher-function satisfaction of acing a test or writing a book or getting a promotion. Kevin and I can shuck oysters we grew with our own hands. We give them to friends, and we watch. They savor them. They close their eyes, they make that face. It gets me right in the brain stem, every time.

So what if we have too many boats?



Tamar Haspel

Tamar Haspel has written about food and health for *Self*, *Glamour*, *Relish*, *Men's Health*, *Fitness*, *Prevention*, *Health*, *Cooking Light*, as well as *USA Today* and the *Washington Post*. She's written four books, and is working on a fifth. In their spare time, she and her husband tend their oyster farm, Barnstable Oyster, whose oysters are available in New York City restaurants, including Le Cirque and The Dutch, and are available through W&T Seafood. Tamar writes about first-hand food, ad nauseam, at *Starving off the Land*.