

Life by the Tides.

A Portrait of Wellfleet's Shellfishing Community

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Jake Puffer, who co-owns the Wellfleet Oysters and Clams farm with his father, Irving Puffer, moves oyster racks on their grant, located on the tidal flats of Mayo Beach.



Top Photo: Workers carry oysters from the Powers Landing grant owned by Andrew Cummings to a truck in preparation for a delivery. Bottom left: Grower Andrew Cummings transfers racks of oyster seeds from his truck onto a boat at Powers Landing. Bottom right: Wellfleet shellfish grower Jason Weisman holds a perfectly-shaped oyster. Restaurants prefer oysters that are not too large, are beautifully shaped for presentation and have deep cups.

It's 5:30 a.m. and the sun is just rising, revealing the figures of Wellfleet's early-morning shellfishing community moving as quietly as dancers on the low-tide flats. Everyone has their work cut out for them and there is a sense of efficiency and speed as they work to complete their tasks before the tide rolls back in. For the past few centuries, the ocean's ebb and flow and the cycle of the seasons have dictated the lives of Wellfleet's hard-working shellfishing families, weaving together generations in their shared mission of producing the town's namesake shellfish.

"The oyster has always been an icon of art, literature and poetry," says longtime Wellfleet shellfish grower Jason Weisman, "and we have a deep understanding year-round that shellfishing in this town fortifies the community itself."

Shellfishing is big business in Wellfleet. With 134 growers cultivating 240 acres of intertidal land and 153 commercial wild harvesters collecting Wellfleet's naturally growing shellfish, Wellfleet's revenue from shellfish was around \$6.3 million in 2017. "We have the perfect salinity, food and tidal exchange—it's really the ideal growing environment," says grower Andrew Cummings,

who has been farming shellfish for the past 19 years.

Wellfleet's abundant oysters drove the early economy, as did whaling and other forms of fishing. But while whaling and fishing fleets decreased in numbers and then vanished, shellfishing remained a mainstay. In the 1850s, Wellfleet began licensing unproductive intertidal areas called "grants," thus encouraging the aquaculture we see today.

Many of the shellfishing grants are owned and worked on by multiple generations of one family. Irving Puffer has been growing shellfish for 40 years, and his son, Jake, grew up working the grant with him and learning the industry. As a

teenager, Jake began wild harvesting and used the income to invest in his own mini grant. After college, he knew he wanted to make shellfish farming his career and became partners with his father. Today, Jake has his own family, and his seven-month-old daughter, Julia, has had her first few visits to the grant. "A lot of younger families can make it work in Wellfleet because of the shellfish industry," says Jake. "We're a small town with a big resource that offers a lot of opportunity and also draws so many people together like oyster farmers, scientists, administrators, wholesalers, consumers and the public."



Shellfish grower Jason Weisman stops to show his son, Leif, 4, a sea creature while working on the family's Loagy Bay shellfish grant. He and his wife, Elisabeth Salén, bring both Leif and younger brother, Loki, 18 months, out on the grant with them as much as they can. Opposite: Top: Marc Austin, 2, tries his hand at the bull rake while cousin, Asher Austin, 2, and Asher's father, Clinton Austin, empty clams into a bucket on the Austin family's Indian Neck grant. The children's grandmother, Barbara Austin, raised her own children on the grant and now frequently brings her five grandchildren out with her while she oversees the grant's activities. Bottom left: Elisabeth Salén, Jason Weisman's wife, sorts oysters with her youngest son, Loki, 18 months, on her back. Bottom right: Longtime shellfish grower, Barbara Austin, takes a break from work with her grandchildren, from left, Everett, 6, Marc, 2, Asher, 2, and Kauanni, 4.

Conscious of the importance of this centuries-old industry, Wellfleet's Shellfishing Department has a strong regulatory presence. "Wellfleet's brand name is hundreds of years old and is known around the world, so our job is to ensure that the shellfishery we have here maintains the reputation it has enjoyed," says Wellfleet shellfish constable Nancy Civetta, who spends a lot of time on the flats connecting with the community and is known for her strict but fair enforcement of the regulations.

Longtime grower Barbara Austin has also made shell-

fish cultivation a family affair. She started shellfishing with her father in Eastham as a young girl and then explored scalloping and wild harvesting. "I really started growing shellfish in 1990 when the shellfish hatchery in Dennis came online," says Austin. "When I had young children, it was much easier to bring them to the grant than to take them wild harvesting with me." Her son, Clinton, now works his own grant, while her daughter, Wendy, is a paramedic. "My kids learned to be independent thinkers and hard workers being on the grant with me," she says.



"Even at a young age, they could drive boats, work hard physically and solve problems." Austin now brings her five grandchildren, ages 3 to 10, out on the grant with her where they explore the flora and fauna, picking up whelks and examining horseshoe crabs while she oversees the grant's activities.

Shellfish farming and harvesting are not for the faint of heart. Taking an oyster from a seed to market is a complex and labor-intensive process. An oyster starts as a tiny, almost invisible, larvae and takes up to two years of careful cultivation to reach a marketable size. Shellfish growers replicate the natural growing process and use tech-

niques such as shaking, tumbling and sorting the oysters to stimulate growth. "It's a very methodical and repetitive process," says Cummings, who spent two seasons in New South Wales, Australia, learning about their practices. "But if you're organized and you plan ahead, you avoid most of the problems and can be successful. It's a huge responsibility and also a privilege to have a shellfish grant."

In addition to the complexities of cultivating shellfish, growers have to pay close attention to weather and temperature as well as predation, diseases and pests. In late December of last year, an unexpected cold front negatively affected the shellfishing community when the bay



Wild harvester, Justin Lynch, separates a cluster of oysters while working Wellfleet's wild oyster beds. Below: Wild harvester, Justin Lynch, ties up a bag of oysters. Lynch recently won the lottery for a three-acre deep water grant and plans to do a combination of wild harvesting and growing.

suddenly iced over and growers still had gear in the water. Similarly, in 2016, Wellfleet's shellfish beds were shut down because of an outbreak of norovirus. Both events had a devastating effect on the growers both economically and emotionally. "It's a close-knit community and when a crisis happens, the community really comes together," says shellfish constable Civetta. During the norovirus outbreak, funds were collected at Wellfleet's annual OysterFest (at which no oysters could be sold) to support the shellfish growers. During the cold snap, growers from different grants worked together to help each other remove their gear as efficiently as possible.

Despite the challenges, husband-and-wife growers Jason and Elizabeth Weisman, like many of Wellfleet's shellfishing families, appreciate the lifestyle that shellfish farming offers. "Elizabeth is out there almost 50 percent of the time with the kids," says Jason, referring to their 4-year-old son, Leif, and 18-month-old son, Loki. "Both Elizabeth and I wanted to work with our surroundings and engage completely and it was just a very natural process to bring children into it," says Jason.



At right: Holbrook Oyster Ranch co-owners, from left, Jacob Dalby, Justin Dalby and Zack Dixon, sort oysters on their 20-foot-by-40-foot barge. The barge provides an on-site working space, allows them to store their equipment and protects them from the elements. Below: A view of the Holbrook Oyster Ranch barge which provides an on-site working space, allows the growers to store their equipment and protects them from the elements.



Wild harvester Justin Lynch, who spends most of his days on the flats harvesting oysters, speaks to the shellfishing lifestyle. "I just love being outside, working with nature's cycle. I could never do the 9 to 5 thing," says Lynch, who grew up in Wellfleet and was always drawn to shellfishing. In the summers, wild harvesters like Lynch have to stick to strict regulations, keeping records on when the shellfish they harvest is exposed to air and making sure it's iced within a two-hour period.

While Lynch enjoys the freedom and lack of overhead wild harvesting offers, he acknowledges that it has its challenges. "You never know what you're going to get. Sometimes the tide doesn't go out enough or you struggle to find the shellfish or it's just a bad year," says Lynch, who

recently won a lottery for a three-acre deep water grant. While deep water hampers many of the shellfish growers' work, some have found creative solutions. Zack Dixon and brothers Jacob and Justin Dalby, who co-own Holbrook Oyster Ranch Inc. in Wellfleet, invested in a barge that allows them to work in deep waters. The custom-made 20-foot-by-40-foot barge not only allows them to store their equipment, but it also provides a work surface on site and protects them from the elements. Like many of the other growers, Dixon talks about the closeness of Wellfleet's shellfishing community. "I have found, with very few exceptions, that the oyster farming community is very helpful and generous," says Dixon. "Everyone has a lot of respect for each other."



Wellfleet's annual OysterFest, Oct. 13 and 14, is produced by Wellfleet SPAT (Shellfish Promotion and Tasting), a nonprofit organization created in 2002 to help support and promote Wellfleet's shellfishing industry. The event, which draws around 20,000 attendees, offers music, local cuisine, New England beers, arts and crafts, educational and fun activities for kids, a 5K run, film screenings, and of course, the famous oyster shuck-off. For more information, visit wellfleetspat.org

A sunset view of Blackfish Creek at high tide—one of the many tidal areas where Wellfleet's oysters are cultivated.

Wellfleet Oysters: Quick Facts

Oysters take up to three years to grow and are typically handled up to 10 times before reaching your plate or palate.

High in protein and Omega-3 fatty acids, oysters are also loaded with beneficial minerals like zinc, copper, iron, magnesium and Vitamin B12.

Oysters clean the water as they feed, filtering anywhere from 15 to 60 gallons of water per day.

Source: Wellfleet SPAT (Shellfish Promotion and Tasting)