

EXPLORER



PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS RAMIREZ FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Where Maine Comes Out of Its Other Shell

By PORTER FOX

ON an overcast morning in late July, high above the swirling current of the Damariscotta River in Maine, Barb Scully stood in her roadside kiosk to sell her catch. A steady procession of summer folk, road trippers and locals cruised down River Road and stopped to browse the coolers and say hello. Every few minutes, a cordless phone would ring, and she would rattle off a list of prices, times, weights and tides.

Ms. Scully fits the image of the Maine fisherwoman well. Her tawny biceps and burly Muck boots contrast with a pearly smile and sea-green eyes. Her clapboard home along the rock-ribbed shore of the Damariscotta, a 15-mile bolt of the Atlantic that juts into midcoast Maine, completes the sketch. There is a derelict Chevrolet Nova in the backyard, and the forest leading down to the riverbank is strewn with buoys, wire traps and spools of rope.

The likeness, however, ended at Ms. Scully's pier. Dangling from her dock were 100 plastic mesh cages that didn't look anything like the iconic metal traps found on nearly every lobster boat in Maine. Her cages were shorter and squatter, and the shellfish her two children had just cleaned didn't look anything like the clawed, red critters adorning some of the state's license plates. They were oysters, and on the last Saturday of July at Ms. Scully's stand, they were outselling Maine's celebrity crustacean 50 to 1.

"I shipped 17,000 oysters last week," Ms. Scully said, passing a plastic bag of freshly plucked oysters to a summer resident from New York City. Ms. Scully, who founded the Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm in 1987 and runs it with the help of her two children, said it took a while to get the hang of oyster farming. "The first year I killed 90 percent of them," she said. "It took 12 years to break even."

People have been shucking oysters on the Damariscotta River for more than 2,000 years, evidenced by quarter-mile-long piles of shells, or middens, left by Native Americans on the riverbanks. But overfishing and pollution in the 19th and 20th centuries wiped out almost all of the oyster beds along the Eastern Seaboard, and it took until the late 1970s for marine biologists at the Darling Marine Center, a University of Maine's marine biology laboratory on the shores of the Damariscotta, to discover that the river was prime for replanting.

As it turns out, the same cold, nutrient-rich water that made Maine the kingpin of the lobster industry also produces perfect oysters. The Damariscotta's water is some of the cleanest in the Northeast and gives the oysters their distinctively briny taste. Because Maine



TOP Morgan Scully at the wheel at her family's oyster farm on the Damariscotta River. From left, her brother, Benn; Elliot Barnes; and Aaron Mason. ABOVE Barb Scully started the Glidden Point farm in 1987.



in different depths and locations. The closer the farms are to the mouth of the river, where the water is saltier, the brinier the meat. Plots closer to the riverhead tend to produce a slightly mellow, sweeter flavor. Pemaquids, like Ms. Scully's Glidden Point oysters, are farmed near the riverhead then submerged at the river mouth for a week to purge river bottom sediment that collects during harvesting. The extra measure ensures the meat will be clean and adds a saltier finish.

Chris Davis founded the Pemaquid Oyster Company in 1986 with five friends and was among the first to adapt research at the Darling center for commercial use. He was starting his doctorate at the center when he first began farming, and he said that many of the Damariscotta's aquaculturists had studied there at one time or another.

Mr. Davis and his partners forged many of the tools that oyster farmers now use, including plastic cages to incubate seedlings and drum sifters to separate mature oysters from smaller ones. With a recent spike in fuel costs and last summer's drop in lobster prices because of shrinking demand, he added, even lobstermen are starting to grow oysters to bolster their bottom line. At last count, more than 25 oyster farms had popped up along the Maine coast in the last decade, Mr. Davis said.

Of all the oyster farmers working the Damariscotta, perhaps none have refined their technique as Ms. Scully has. Before going into business, she was a marine biologist for 12 years with the state Marine Resources Department.

Like most farmers, Ms. Scully, 46, gets her seedlings from local fisheries and grows them in cages for a year until they are almost an inch long. Then she plants them in water at least 40 feet deep to make the shells extra thick for easy prying and to add a touch of sweetness to the meat. She waits four years before harvesting them — usually by donning a wetsuit and diving to the river bed to collect them by hand.

Ms. Scully is among the few farmers who still dive for their oysters. She says the technique is less disruptive for the shellfish and ensures superior taste. When she brings them up, her children, Morgan, 15, and Benn, 13, chip barnacles off the shells on a wet storage dock where the oysters wait for shipping.

The extra care Ms. Scully takes adds hundreds of hours to the process, but the result is a uniform shell and a buttery, briny taste that Sean Rembold, the chef at Marlow & Sons, a cafe and raw bar in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, describes as "majestic and beautiful." Rowan Jacobsen, who wrote "A Geography of Oysters: The Connoisseur's Guide to Oyster Eating in America" (Bloomsbury USA, 2007) even calls it "one of the world's great oysters."

For Ms. Scully, there was never any other way. "I don't care to spend my life doing something I know I can do better," she said. "I might be the most picky aquaculturist in the state of Maine. Maybe in the world."

oysters take two to four years to grow to maturity, compared with a year or two in warmer waters, they also develop firmer meat, a deep cup and a thick shell that makes for easier shucking.

These days there are 12 ma-and-pa farms like Glidden Point scattered along the banks of the river. Every year, they ship more than two million oysters to restaurants like the Tabard Inn in Washington and the raw bars at Balthazar and Craftsteak in New York City.

If the Darling center was the birthplace of the oyster's resurgence, then the port villages of Newcastle and Damariscotta are the shellfish's hometowns. They share the Main Street Bridge that spans the river's headwaters and edge a crescent harbor filled with wooden day-sailers and classic 1960s fishing boats. From the mid-18th century to the early 20th century, the towns were among the busiest shipbuilding centers in New England — with 30 shipyards turning out 400 boats in that time. But with the demise of the shipyards, the pride of the towns comes these days in a long, bony shell.

On a recent Friday, tourist shops selling oyster T-shirts, mugs and cocktail napkins lined Main Street in Damariscotta, the bigger of the two towns. At King Eider's Pub, the host waltzed around a tiny oyster bar carved into the

second floor, passing out a self-published magazine that described the intricacies of oyster farming.

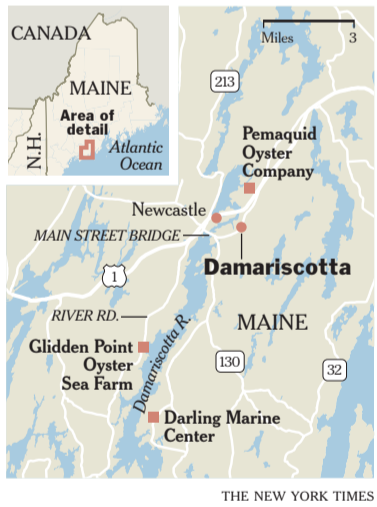
By sundown, the center of all-things-oyster had hit full swing across the street at Schooner Landing's dockside bar. All summer, the restaurant hosts free-oyster Fridays, and an hour into the event, Larry Sidelinger, the shucker, pried open a half bushel of freshly harvested oysters from the Pemaquid

*Move over lobster!
The oyster is back
on the midcoast.*

Oyster Company, just a mile and a half down the river.

Several dozen motorcyclists, yachtsmen and tourists crowded around the tented bar. When someone asked Mr. Sidelinger how he had become so good with the knife, he hollered in a thick Downeast accent, "Dumb and dumbah!" Then he flashed his "Oysters Make You Moyster" T-shirt and slid two meaty half shells down the bar.

Oyster farmers on the Damariscotta all grow the same species of oyster, yet each farm has developed surprisingly different strains and tastes by planting



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MAINE OYSTER CULT

GETTING THERE

Visitors can fly to Portland, Me., and drive the 60 miles north on Interstate 295 and Route 1, which can take up to two hours in the summer. You can also fly Cape Air from Boston to Rockland, Me., then drive 26 miles on Route 1, west to Damariscotta. Rental cars are available at both airports.

HOW TO GET AROUND

The best way to see the Damariscotta River is from the water. **Midcoast Kayak** (47 Main Street, Damariscotta; 207-563-5732; www.midcoastkayak.com) leads river tours and rents sea kayaks that visitors can paddle to some of the middens.

The **Damariscotta River Association** (207-563-1393; www.draclt.org) maintains riverside trails with access to several middens.

WHERE TO EAT

The **Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm** (707 River Road, Edgcomb; 207-633-3599; www.oysterfarm.com) sells its catch on site.

The copper bar at the **Damariscotta River Grill** (155 Main Street, Damariscotta; 207-563-2992; www.damariscottarivergrill.com) is a great spot to taste half shells on ice, local fish and produce. A half-dozen Pemaquids run \$11.

The oyster bar at **King Eider's Pub** (2 Elm Street, Damariscotta; 207-563-6008; www.kingeiderspub.com) serves oysters and traditional pub fare. Fresh-picked native crabs, \$9.

Schooner Landing (40 Main Street, Damariscotta; 207-563-7447) serves Maine classics like lobster stew, \$9, and the fried-clam rolls are \$12.

WHERE TO STAY

The **Flying Cloud Bed and Breakfast** (45 River Road, Newcastle; 207-563-2484; www.theflyingcloud.com) overlooks the river and has five rooms with private baths, starting at \$85.

The **Newcastle Inn** (60 River Road; 207-563-5685; www.newcastleinn.com) is a slightly larger, spiffier variation, with 14 rooms, starting at \$135.



At the Glidden Point Oyster Sea Farm, even the Scully family's dog, Dobby, gets into the act.