

Community

Yaquina Bay oysters recognized as a pearls of the Northwest

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OSU's Hatfield Center helps oyster industry

YAQUINA BAY — Oysters from these waters are showing up on restaurant menus from Newport to New York, from Portland to Taiwan.

Oregon Oyster Farms is experiencing a boom in new business, including Asian clients, thanks in part to the language skills and knowledge of manager Liu Xin.

Of course, the oysters have something big to do with that, too.

"The taste is unique. It's sweeter," Xin said. "When you eat our oysters, they don't have that fishy taste."

Xin attributed the great flavor to the unique conditions of Yaquina Bay.

The way the bivalves are grown at Oregon Oyster Farms, halfway between Toledo and Newport, is unique, as well.

Most oyster farms place the mollusks in the bottom of the water, in bags or loose on the sand. The Yaquina Bay bottom is muddy, though, so Oregon Oyster Farms suspends most of its shellfish on pallets or on ropes instead.

Xin came to the United States from China in 1992 to attend Oregon State University, and began studying at the Hatfield Marine Science Center n just down the bay from the farm he has supervised since 1997.

He still works in coordination with the OSU institution, which has a long history of helping out the oyster industry.

"We really are the best place on the West Coast" for oyster research, said Chris Langdon, professor with the Molluscan Broodstock Program at the Hatfield Center.

OSU's first lab on Yaquina Bay, in the 1940s, was for studying oysters, Langdon said. The Hatfield Center now gets about \$1 million a year in federal and state funds for oyster research, he added. The Molluscan Broodstock Program also recently received a \$350,000 federal appropriation.

Oysters are big business, and represent a \$68 million industry on the West Coast, Langdon said. The bulk of that is in Washington, and Oregon only accounts for \$1 million to \$1.5 million worth of product.

Oregon Oyster Farms, the oldest oyster farm in Oregon, was created in 1907 to provide what is now Dan and Louie's Oyster Bar in Portland with a steady supply of bivalves.

Other farms in Oregon are at Coos Bay, Tillamook Bay and Netarts Bay.

However, the Oregon oyster industry is facing challenges because of increased pollution and stricter environmental standards, conflicts between growing sites and recreation use, and expansion of pest organisms.

Given those issues, growing a bigger, stronger oyster has become more important to farmers. And the Hatfield Center is helping them do that.

The Molluscan Broodstock Program has reared families of Pacific oysters since 1995, and the first generation



ANDY CRIPE/Gazette-Times
Oregon Oyster Farms manager Liu Xin examines some freshly harvested Kumumoto oysters recently. Xin moved from China to Oregon in 1992 to study at the Hatfield Marine Science Center in Newport.

showed about 10 percent more yield on average compared to wild bivalves, Lewis said. The selection also showed greater growth than hatchery oysters.

"The industry's quite interested in that, and they have used our broodstock in commercial hatcheries to produce billions of offspring," Langdon said.

Oregon oyster operations rely on hatcheries because the waters here generally are too cold for the Pacific oyster to spawn.

Oregon Oyster Farms is among the breeding program's test sites, which include farms in California, Washington and Alaska.

Xin said faster growth and meat content are important to the industry.

Oregon Oyster Farms harvests oysters that are from 1- to 5-years-old, depending on what size is needed for the market.

While the Hatfield Center is focusing on Pacific oysters, Xin and company are doing well with Kumamoto oysters, smaller premium mollusks that originate from Japan.

Though wholesale sales with restaurants and other clients is the bulk of the business, retail sales from an onsite storefront are important as well, Xin said.