

Oyster farmer tills Katama Bay

Veteran Martha's Vineyard oysterman Jack Blake combines innovation and perspiration to raise an increasingly valuable mollusk.

By **Barry Stringfellow** - August 6, 2014



Jack Blake hand picks oysters that he's been raising since 2012 and immediately puts them on ice. — Photo by Michael Cummo

Katama Bay is still as a mill pond when Jack Blake boards his 23-foot skiff, early on a recent morning. The shrill cry of a hungry osprey breaks the peaceful silence. That, and the sound of Mr. Blake slapping at a swarm of no-see-ums. “Usually there’s a breeze here and they aren’t too bad,” he says. “Let’s get moving.”

For the next 10 hours, Mr. Blake will not stop moving. He will lift heavy loads of ice and oysters and the cages and the bags and the trays in which they grow. He will inspect hundreds of oysters, one by one, and knock off the jingle shells and barnacles that can slowly kill them. He will pack his oysters on ice, or put them back into the bay, as quickly as possible. Back on land, he will cool the day’s take — which averages 700 oysters — down to 33 degrees. Then he and Susan Blake, his wife and business partner, will load their refrigerated van and deliver Sweet Neck Farm oysters to restaurants around the Island. Sweet Neck Farm oysters are in such demand that the Blakes can’t spare any for their off-Island distributor, J.P.’s Shellfish from Eliot, Maine, until October. Then, the exported Sweet Neck Farm oysters will end up in restaurants from Florida to California.

Mr. Blake’s day begins at 3 am. He works at his computer, entering data from the day before and figuring out what cages or trays need tending that day. “I don’t like working at the computer that much,” he says. “It’s a helpful tool, but I just want to be on the water.” Mr. Blake loads up his truck at 5 am and tries to be on the water by 6, although that depends on what needs fixing. “There’s always maintenance, every day,” he says. “But that’s part of the fun. I like figuring things out.”

From March 15 to October 15, Mr. Blake works seven days a week, except when a hurricane rumbles up the coast. During the winter, he averages three days a week, which at times this past winter meant working on the bay in heavy snow. "The bay used to freeze solid before the breach," he says, referring to the rupture of Norton Point Beach during a nor'easter in April 2007. "The day after the breach, Sue and I were out here and it was like being on the high seas. We both got seasick."

A new trade

Mr. Blake moved to the Island from Marshfield two years after high school, in 1974. He worked as a cook at Lawry's Fish Market during the summer and as a scalloper during the winter. Eventually he got into the construction trade in 1979. "I wanted to build my own house, so I figured this was a good way to learn," he said.

Mr. Blake built his house and became a custom home builder. "I built all kinds of houses — capes, gambrels, even a six-sided house. But after a while, I needed a new challenge," he says. He started quahog fishing full time, but eventually his conservation conscience began to kick in. "I got to the point where I pretty much fished out Caleb's Pond, and I felt bad about it. Then I heard about a new aquaculture program run by Martha's Vineyard Shellfish Group (MVSG) and I applied. It was intended to help the commercial fishermen who were going out of business, but one of the spots didn't get filled."

"Of the 15 guys that started in the program in 1995, Jack is one of the five who stuck with it," MVSG director Rick Karney said in a phone interview with The Times.

Mr. Blake says his career as an oysterman has been an ongoing process of trial and error and improvisation. "There was a big learning curve. I didn't make a dime the first three years. What works in Wellfleet won't work here. You always have to fine-tune things, you're always learning."

Making the rounds

"Pretty good office huh,?" he says, indicating the expanse of Katama Bay as he motors to his first stop of the morning — his 650-square-foot raft, or as he calls it, "My home away from home." The raft is moored next to his one-acre farm where 350 buoys mark each one of his cages. Mr. Blake built his raft, which has a tumbler that he also designed and built to knock off unwanted hitchhikers from his oysters. "That took 7,400 welds," he says, pointing to the slowly rotating cylinder with oysters from cage 279. "I put it on gentle cycle. You don't want them to be jarred or they leak some of their water."

The tumbler, and all electronics on the raft, are powered by a small wind turbine that sits atop the canvas roof that also gives the oysters shade. Most of the oysters in the tumbler are from seed that he began raising in 2012.

"I just love being out here on my own," Mr. Blake says, lifting a heavy bag of oysters out of a cage.

But his treasured solitude comes with an additional element of risk. The effects of the polio he contracted when he was two years old are still with him. "My legs are getting much weaker," he says. "Because of the polio, my leg muscles never fully developed. Now, if I fall down, I can't get up by myself. People always ask me how long I'll do this. I used to say until I'm 85, but I'm not so sure," says Mr. Blake, who turns 61 on August 11.

After the oysters are iced or put back in their cages, Mr. Blake, sweat dripping from his brow and his white tee-shirt besmeared with Katama Bay silt, heads to the mouth of the bay to tend to his upwellers — a nursery for juvenile oysters. Mr. Blake designed and built his upwellers to utilize the swift current that runs between Katama Bay and the narrow mouth into Edgartown Harbor. "The upweller feeds the seed a steady

stream of nutrients,” he says, admiring a tray of thumbnail-sized oysters. “It also keeps them spaced out and keeps them clean. Look at them, they’re beautiful.”

With funds from MVSG, Mr. Blake helped other Katama Bay oystermen build their own upwellers. “Jack trained other farmers how to build the upweller he designed,” Rick Karney said. “They built them communally at the town oyster barn. Jack’s been great about sharing all his knowledge.”

“There really isn’t competition,” Mr. Blake says. “Katama Bay oysters are some of the best because we all share information. A few guys started out competing like fishermen, but they’re beginning to understand. There’s plenty of places to sell.”

Mr. Blake says timing plays a crucial role in oyster farming. “You have to plant at the right time, you have to air dry at the right time, you have to know when they’re spawning and you have to harvest at the right time. It’s an art.”

Booming demand

Oyster farmers on the whole are also benefiting from propitious timing with the nationwide surge in the popularity of oysters and oyster bars. Oyster production on the east coast has doubled in the past five years, according to East Coast Shellfish Growers Association (ECSGA), and last year, cultured shellfish from farms between Virginia and Maine brought in \$103 million, more than the groundfishing industry for the same area. In Massachusetts in 2012, 4.1 million bushels of oysters were sold, bringing in \$9.5 million to Bay State farmers. In 2013, 4.3 million bushels of oysters worth \$10.8 million were sold. Closer to home, last year, between the 34,050 bushels of oysters harvested in Chilmark and the 163,500 bushels harvested in Edgartown, sales for Island oystermen totaled \$1,963,500, according to town reports. Mr. Blake says he’s getting up to 90 cents per oyster this summer, well above last summer’s peak of 75 cents per oyster.

Battling vibrio

As with any farmers, oyster farmers have to deal with pests and pestilence. Vibrio, typically a warm water problem, has become an increasingly serious problem for Island farmers. Last September, an outbreak of Vibrio illness led to a month-long closure of oyster operations in Katama Bay. It was just one of numerous closures across the state, which has seen a steady rise in Vibrio cases since 2011, when 13 cases of the disease were reported. In 2012, 27 cases of Vibrio were reported, and 58 were reported in 2013. Twelve of those cases had some relationship to Katama Bay, according to state reports.

So far this year, two cases of vibrio have been confirmed by state Department of Health (DPH) officials. One of them was linked to a Katama Bay oyster harvested on July 2. State regulations, adopted from this year’s Interstate Shellfish Sanitation Conference, require an immediate shutdown of a farming area when two cases of Vibrio are confirmed within a month. August 2 passed without another reported case, so for now, it’s business as usual for Katama oystermen. But the specter of a shutdown still looms, especially as water temperatures rise. “I know where the oyster came from,” Mr. Blake said. “The DPH inspector said he did everything right. Sometimes there’s nothing else you can do.” One mitigating factor in a Vibrio outbreak is that, unlike an agricultural pox, the oysters are not permanently damaged. When the water turns colder, the bacteria count will drop, making the oysters edible once again. Mr. Blake said that after last year’s shutdown, he was eventually able to sell all of his crop.

Happy as an oyster

“Oyster farming is a win-win,” Mr. Blake says, as he heads back to the Katama boat launch with the day’s harvest. “You put back what you take in, and the oysters take a lot of nitrogen out of the water. It’s the ideal



business for the Island, and it's a great way to make a living."

Mr. Blake says there's also an intuitive element to oyster farming. "I know what makes my oysters happy," he says. "They need space. If you crowd them, and they get stressed out, and it shows. You can't get too greedy."

Mr. Blake also has an attachment to a few oysters from his 1999 crop. Of the 400 he put aside, three or four are left. "They're my pets," he says. "I think the record in the United States is 12 inches. I'm going to bring one out when it hits 13 [inches]. But nobody's going to eat it."
