



PAUL GAUVIN PHOTOS

IN THE BAG – Chris Gargiulo, who runs Cotuit Oyster Co. displays a metal mesh bag of seed oyster that will be deposited in the bay for growth.

## Gargiulo guards Cotuit's future in oyster market

By Paul Gauvin

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What do William Shakespeare and Cotuit Bay have in common?

Oysters.

In his only comedy set in England, the Bard, in "The Merry Wives of Windsor," writes: "Why, then the world is mine oyster, which I with sword will open."

The world may have been his oyster in England, but in Cotuit, just the opposite is true for Chris Gargiulo, the newest in a long line of operators of the up and down Cotuit Oyster Co. on Little River Road. For Gargiulo, one might say, the oyster is his world.

Now a Cotuit resident, as a child from the Boston area Gargiulo used to visit Mashpee often where his grandfather had built a few vacation homes. After studies at Northeastern University in criminal justice, Gargiulo said, "I spent 10 years in the corporate world in Boston" while still visiting the Cape.

It was during such a visit that he met Dick Nelson, who operated Cotuit Oyster for 30 years from a small waterfront shack on Little River Road. "I was looking to transition and Mr. Nelson was looking for new blood," said Gargiulo, 35. "It's hard work," he added, indicating it isn't an ideal pursuit of aging workers.

A seven-year friendship developed as Gargiulo displayed an interest in the operation and subsequently went to work for Nelson for several years, learning the business from someone who had run it through good times and bad. At one point, Nelson, who is now a consultant to the oyster company, had to confront an unfortunate event when the company bought seed that turned out to be contaminated, setting the business back for several years. "The company was hit hard then. There was no pathology testing so you didn't know the seed was infected," Gargiulo said.

"That's a lot less likely to happen now. The division of Marine Fisheries regulates the brood stock," Gargiulo said, standing alongside the 24-foot workboat in which he was placing metal mesh bags filled to about a third of their capacity with seed oysters. The boat's bow was nosed up on the shore pointing at a driveway upon which dozens of metal bags were laid out to dry, under an unusually warm autumn sun, after being washed.

The bags would later in the day be dropped into bay waters for the winter. The seed will feed and hibernate – much like Cotuit villagers - and grow enough to fill the bag by the time the oysters are harvested from the company's 33.82 acres of bottom in Cotuit Bay.

During the growing season the product in upwellers can grow more than a millimeter a week, more than doubling in total volume each week. Oysters in these conditions have recorded growth rates as high as 5 millimeters in a single week, increasing their total volume as much as five to ten-fold.

"Technology has changed the previous methods of farming oysters," Gargiulo said, "when it was pretty much a matter of dumping the seed on the bottom and crossing your fingers." Today, new methods allow growing from the size of a speck of sand to a full, 3-inch legal size delicacy.

The shellfish aquaculture industry has come a long way in a relatively short time by developing methods, such as the use of upwellers – floating cages that help feed and protect spat – to the mesh bags that keep predators from devouring the vulnerable seed shellfish in the second phase of propagation.

While the company ships all year, Gargiulo said, this is the busiest time, seeding, harvesting, packaging in 100 lb. bags and shipping from a company

location in Mashpee.

Gargiulo says the purity and chemical makeup of the water in Cotuit Bay account for the distinctive Cotuit flavor.

Last week was particularly busy for Gargiulo. He had to attend the day-long annual meeting of the Massachusetts Aquaculture Association in Sandwich while approaching the day his wife, Kristi, would give birth to the couple's first child.

Gargiulo sees a brighter future for shellfish aquaculture because of the advanced propagation methods, but notes natural disasters can still derail an aquaculture operation. For example, he said, oysters stop growing when the water temperature drops below 48 degrees. If ice forms, though, he has a narrow channel in the bay that doesn't ice up and oysters are moved there.

Cotuit Bay has been yielding oysters commercially since 1857 and during that time the briny delicacy from the sea has become renowned in gastronomic circles – as has Shakespeare in the stuffy dens of the of the literati. Order oysters at the popular Legal Fish restaurant locations in New England, or Shaw's Crab House in Chicago, Rodney's Oyster House in Ontario or the Grand Central Station oyster bar and restaurant in New York, and chances are you're getting the distinctive taste of the plump and salty Cotuit Bay oyster.

Oysters do have distinctive taste depending on where they are from, even next door aquaculture grants, says Mark Begley of Beach Point Oyster Farm in Barnstable Harbor, who says his oysters and those of his neighbors Barnstable and Great Marsh Sea Farms have different nuances of taste.

Cotuit Oyster Co. also sells retail locally and via distributors in this country and in Canada.

Shellfish cultivation is traced back to Native Americans and recorded since 1857 when Capt. William Childs retired from the sea to become an oysterman. His was the biggest oyster company on the Cape at the time. The product was packed in barrels, hauled in carts to the West Barnstable train station to be shipped to Boston, New York an other Northeast points.

Today, Gargiulo said, oysters can be plucked from the bay, processed, packaged and shipped to Chicago in refrigerator trucks, all within a two-day period.

Gargiulo represents the new generation and the continuation of a family industry in Cotuit, a role he also envisions for his new and first child.