

Pearls of Wisdom

Riverbed mollusks turned 4 South Carolina kin from investors to family farmers.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LORI VANOVER WAUKESHA, WISCONSIN

On a warm, sunny spring day in Bluffton, South Carolina, I pulled on my rubber boots and climbed aboard a boat for a lesson in off-bottom oyster farming. As I rode to the farm with part of the May River Oyster Co. team, I was delighted to spot dolphins, bonnethead sharks and stingrays swimming in the crystal clear water and a lone osprey soaring overhead.

When I decided to visit the low-country region, I knew little about oysters except that they taste delicious. I grew up in the landlocked Midwest, surrounded by corn and soybeans, not Spanish moss and *Spartina* grass.

But for my fellow passengers, the co-owners of May River Oyster Co., this pleasurable boat ride was just another day's work.

Brad and Olivia Young have full-time day jobs—she is a hotel operator and he has a trucking business—but had wanted to start a family business that would benefit the community.

“In February 2015 I asked her if I could invest in an oyster farm—a substantial commitment,” Brad said. “As soon as she heard that it helped the river and was good for the environment, she said, ‘Do what you need to do.’ The land here was so important to her dad.”

Olivia agreed. “Daddy called this God’s country. He said everybody needs to do their part to take care of this land. We’ve raised our kids on this river for generations.”

With Olivia’s nephews Austin and Andrew Harter as co-owners, the family now controls the entire business, and oyster farming is the heart and soul of everything they do. “As South Carolina natives with an unwavering love of the May River, we hope to provide superior oysters to consumers and protect the river at the same time,” Olivia said. “We are proud to be completely family-owned and -operated.”

Bluffton is so named because the town sits on a high bluff overlooking the May River, an estuary of the Atlantic Ocean. May River Oyster Co. leases 10 acres of land and has rights to all shellfish on the leases.

“Once we established a mariculture lease to harvest wild oysters and raise farmed oysters, the state started monitoring every aspect of our business,” Brad said. “The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) monitors our harvest times, temperature logs, washing stations, restrooms, ice-making machines and the overall cleanliness of the equipment used by the company.

“And the state Department of Natural Resources grades the results of inspections from DHEC to keep our maricultural leases in good standing. If either of these organizations finds that we are lacking in standards, our lease will be removed.”

Oysters must be refrigerated within several hours of harvest. “Ours almost always are within three to six hours,” Austin said. “We always try to have the freshest



Brad observes thousands of wild oysters growing along the banks of the May River.

product, so we harvest to fill orders and deliver by the next day.”

All the oysters are washed thoroughly to remove mud. “That cleanliness distinguishes our company,” Austin said. “The customer gets a bushel of oysters clean and ready to go for chefs to cook them.”

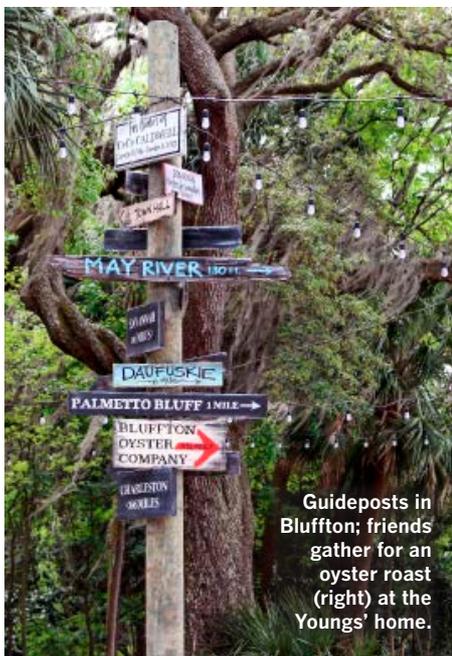
As we approached the farm, Brad, Andrew and Austin pointed out a few people on the shoreline harvesting wild oysters. Once I knew what I was looking at, I realized the sandy banks of the river were coated in what appeared to be massive clusters of oyster shells. The company works to keep it that way.

“We rarely eat oysters ourselves because we need to sell them, but when we do, we return the empty



Farm-raised oysters are rounded. Brothers Andrew and Austin Harter (right) move them to bigger mesh bags as they grow.





Guideposts in Bluffton; friends gather for an oyster roast (right) at the Youngs' home.



shells to the shoreline,” Andrew said. “And we encourage our customers to return their shells, too. Oysters need to latch onto a hard surface to grow, and often that’s another oyster.”

Andrew distributed baskets of shells on a shoreline site the family is trying to build back up. He says their work makes a difference in the wild population numbers. “Returning shells promotes growth of wild oysters and is especially important in areas that have been overharvested,” he said.

When we reached the farm, Brad explained how raising oysters helps the environment: “The oyster is the engine that keeps the river going. They’re like an aquarium filter for this ecosystem. The healthier the oysters, the better the ecosystem. We’re adding thousands to the river by farming so the wild population doesn’t suffer.”

Farmed oysters are bred in nurseries and start as larvae. “We get them from Lady’s Island Oyster in Beaufort when they’re 2 to 3 millimeters long,” Brad said. “Then we put them in mesh bags that are kept in off-bottom wire cages and submerged in water at the farm. They must be totally subtidal.”

Andrew and Austin showed me how they monitor and rotate the oysters daily as they grow. They use

They’re like an aquarium filter. The healthier the oysters, the better the ecosystem.

three sizes of growing mesh— $\frac{1}{8}$ inch, $\frac{1}{4}$ inch and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch. Larger mesh allows more water and food into the bags, so the oysters grow faster. It generally takes 12 to 20 months for the oysters to reach adult market size.

Oysters also grow more rapidly when the water warms up, but the state halts harvest between May 15 and Oct. 1 because bacteria levels go up in the heat. That explains the popular notion that oysters should be eaten only during months that contain an R in their names. But this policy may soon be changing.

“The state DNR and DHEC are currently studying the option of harvesting farm-raised oysters only during the summer months,” Brad said. “These organizations are working with oyster farmers to ensure safe operating procedures so

the law can be changed to include summer harvest. A decision on this will be made during 2017.”

Farm-raised oysters are more highly sought than wild ones because they meet chefs’ needs for presentation, texture and size. Under controlled conditions, the oysters develop a rounded shape rather than the long, slender wild harvest “blades.” “By restaurant standards, the perfect oyster is about 3 inches long, 2 inches wide and 1 inch deep,” Brad said.

And farming oysters means delivering more oysters faster. “Chefs are interested in a farm-to-table local product—or, in our case, river-to-restaurant. We can sell thousands of oysters, mostly in Savannah, Hilton Head Island and Bluffton,” he said. “The business is supply-driven—the demand is unlimited. Having a waiting list is always a nice thing.”

May River Oyster Co. plans to expand, adding more farm sites and increasing production. Brad hopes to pass the business down through future generations.

As I soaked up the sun watching fiddler crabs burrow into the soft mud, I understood why Andrew says there’s nowhere else in the world he’d rather make a living.

“This is the world’s best office,” he said. “This is my paradise.” **R**