

# Pearls of Wisdom

Riverbed mollusks turned these South Carolinians from investors to family farmers.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LORI VANOVER WAUKESHA, WISCONSIN

**O**na warm, sunny spring day in Bluffton, South Carolina, I pulled on my rubber boots and climbed aboard a boat for a lesson in 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 clear water, and an osprey soaring overhead.

When I first decided to visit the low country region, I didn't know much 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, Brad Young and his wife Olivia's nephews Austin and Andrew Harter, co-owners of May River Oyster Company, this pleasurable boat ride was just another day's work.

Brad and Olivia both have full-time day jobs; she is a hotel operator and he has a trucking business. They had long been interested in starting 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 'it helps the river and is 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."

The family now controls the entire business, and oyster farming is at 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 says. "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 that connects to the Atlantic Ocean. The May River Oyster Co. leases 10 acres of land and has rights to all shellfish in the water.

"Once we established a mariculture lease to harvest wild oysters and raise farmed oysters, the state started monitoring every aspect of our business," Brad says.

"The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) monitors our harvest times, temperature logs, washing stations, restrooms, ice making machines and overall cleanliness of the equipment used in the company. And the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) grades the results of inspections from DHEC to keep our maricultural lease in good standing. If either of these organizations finds that we are lacking in standards, our lease will be removed."

Austin explained oysters must be refrigerated within several hours of



harvest. "Ours almost always are within three to six hours," he said.

"We always try to have the freshest product, so we harvest to fill orders and deliver by the next day."

All their oysters are washed thoroughly to remove mud. "That cleanliness distinguishes our company," Austin says. "The customer gets a bushel, clean and ready to go for chefs to cook them."

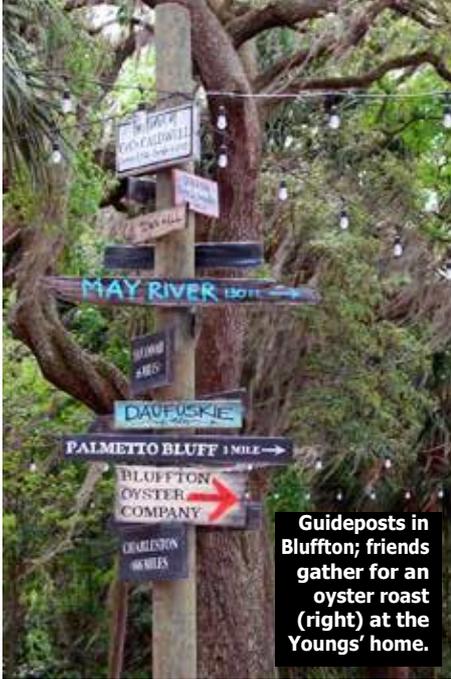
As we approached the farm, Brad, Andrew and Austin pointed out a few people on the shoreline harvesting wild oysters. Once I knew what I was looking at, I realized the sandy banks of the river were coated in massive clusters of oyster shells. The men said they work to keep it that way.

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



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





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



"We rarely eat oysters because we need to sell them, but when we do, we return the empty shells to the shoreline," Andrew says. "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."

We had a few baskets full of shells on the boat from an oyster roast the night before. Andrew distributed them on a shoreline site the family is trying to build back up. He believes their efforts are making a difference in population numbers.

"Returning shells promotes growth of wild oysters and is especially important in areas that have been over harvested," he says.

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 their life as larvae. "We get them from Lady's Island Oyster in Beaufort when they're 2 to 3 millimeters long," Brad says. "Then we put them in mesh bags that kept in off-bottom wire cages and submerged under water in at the farm. They must be subtidal."

## *Farm-raised oysters are more highly sought than wild ones because they meet chefs' needs for presentation, texture and size.*

Andrew and Austin showed me how they monitor and rotate the oysters daily as they grow. They use three sizes of growing mesh— $\frac{1}{8}$  inch,  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch and  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch. Bigger mesh allows more water and food into the bags, so the oysters grow faster. It generally takes one year 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. This explains the popular notion that oysters should be eaten only during months that contain an R. But the 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 growing conditions in the bags and cages, the oysters form a rounded shape rather than the long, slender wild blades.

"By restaurant standards, the perfect oyster is 3 inches long by 2 inches wide and 1 inch deep," Brad says. And farming oysters means delivering more oysters faster.

"Chefs are asking for a farm-to-table local product—or, in our case, river-to-restaurant. We can sell thousands, mostly in Savannah, Hilton Head Island and Bluffton," he says. "The business is supply-driven—demand is unlimited."

May River Oyster Co. plans to add more farm sites and boost production. Brad aims to pass the business to future generations.

As I soaked up the sun, watched fiddler crabs burrow into the soft mud and learned how to shuck an oyster, I understood why Andrew said there's nowhere else he'd rather make a living.

"This is the world's best office," he said. "This is my paradise."