

PROFILE

PEMAQUID MUSSEL FARMS

Demise of Great Eastern makes room for new owner-operated mussel farm in Maine

BY MURIEL L. HENDRIX

Carter Newall says that several Maine-based mussel growers who joined together last April to form Pemaquid Mussel Farms like to call themselves “the survivors.” He is alluding to the demise of New Harbor-based Great Eastern Mussel Farms, which closed its doors last June after almost 30 years of business. Newall worked with Great Eastern from the beginning, developing its quality control standards among other jobs. Several other members of the newly formed Pemaquid Mussel Farms also got their start in mussel culture with help from Great Eastern.

In 2000, Great Eastern began a partnership with fishermen who wanted to try their hand with mussel culture on ropes suspended from rafts. The company helped finance rafts and other equipment and bought mussels from the growers. Great Eastern also provided support with *Mumbles*, the 60- by 24-foot, thirty-ton harvest barge built by Vic Levesque in Bar Harbor, for various tasks on the rafts from socking seed to harvesting and processing mussels.

Newall says that as Great Eastern expanded and diversified, it reduced the amount of support for owners of rafts. Several months before



Larrabee run *Mumbles* and tend the rafts. John Richardson, a hydraulics engineer in Blue Hill, deals with any problems of that nature on the barge, which has several hydraulic motors. Peter Fischer, who has worked in the Maine seafood industry for 30 years, handles the company's bookkeeping and marketing. These owners have a varied number of shares in the company; Pemaquid Oyster Farms located in Damariscotta also owns shares.

Typically, Newall, Anderson and Larrabee board *Mumbles* once a week for maintenance at raft sites, twice a week to harvest. When harvesting, they take out 1,000 pound totes filled with ice and make up the 10-pound shellfish bags as they motor to the site. Once at the raft, they use a winch on *Mumbles* to bring up the mussel-covered ropes in a 9-foot basket that can hold 800 pounds of mussels. The mussels are shaken off and shoveled onto a conveyor belt which carries them through a machine that separates the clumps. Then they are put in another machine that washes, grades and debyses the mussels and sends them into totes of sea water where they purge for a couple of hours. Seed mussels are graded out and wrapped onto new ropes. Finally, the crew switches to bagging, weighing and tagging. The completed bags are placed in water again for a final rinse before they are put on ice for the trip back to land.

At the day's end, the men make deliveries on the way home: Newall to the Damariscotta area, Anderson to customers around Camden and Larrabee, Belfast. Regular deliveries are made to over 40 restaurants in MidCoast Maine.

Rick Hirsch, owner of the Damariscotta River Grill and the Anchor Inn Restaurant in Damariscotta, says that with deliveries from Pemaquid twice a week, the product's freshness has made all the difference to him. “I'm getting them five to seven days fresher than PEI mussels,” he says. “They have a much better shelf life, a lot less spoilage.”

Newall says owners believe that being able to deliver their mussels as soon as four hours after they are harvested, and additionally, having a product that is a native species raised in an environmentally sustainable manner, are Pemaquid's strongest selling points.

Now that the owners of Pemaquid Mussel Farms have figured out a way to reorganize and thus survive Great Eastern's shutdown, the next challenge is to survive the flagging economy. Fischer says that they have been selling approximately 3,000 pounds a week; he would like to increase that to 5,000 pounds. The company also has a value-added product: larger mussels that are shucked by Oceanville Seafood in Stonington and hickory and cherry wood-smoked by Stonington Seafood Products. These are available in ½ pound bags at Farmer's Markets and some local stores.

Fischer says Pemaquid Mussel Farms plans to continue its focus on local markets. “We want to sell as close to home as we can,” he says. “That way, we can be sure we provide people with an outstanding product, plus we're paying attention to food miles and energy costs.”

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Seeding the ropes.

the company announced it was closing its doors, the group that formed Pemaquid Mussel Farms decided to go out on their own. They made a deal to buy out Great Eastern's interest in their rafts and also to purchase *Mumbles*. The company has a total of 10 rafts on four different farms located on the Damariscotta River, in Belfast Bay and off Stonington and Lamoine.

Pemaquid Mussel Farms is completely owner-operated, says Newall, observing “There's a lot of value to employees owning the company. You put in that extra twenty percent effort because it's your company.” The group, he says, is multi-talented, giving it the advantage of being able to deal with just about any situation that comes up without paying for outside support. He has the expertise and experience to solve problems relating to the biology of raising mussels, and all of the partners are good handy-men.

While Levesque is working another job cutting granite, Newall, Greg Anderson and Joe



Harvesting a basket of mussels.



Ready to process.



Debysser.



Declumper/grader and seed recovery.



Purging bins.



Mussel raft in Lamoine.