

Wellfleet Oysters Farm to Table  
Taylor Kmiec

WELLFLEET- It is a chilly April morning in Wellfleet. The sun has barely made it above the horizon to start warming up the day. Most people would feel this is too early to start your workday, but looking around there are lots of oyster men and women working on their grants. The sun is warm, but the wind is cold. Shivering, the hike out to the grant is made.

Waddling in waders, there is about 100 yards until we arrive to our final destination. A grant on Egg Island in Wellfleet. The waters slushes as it is about waist deep as we trudge out to see first-hand what it is like to farm oysters as the farmers prepare for the busiest season here on Cape Cod...summer.

Oysters have always been extremely popular, especially on the East Coast and in places like Cape Cod. Wellfleet has been a top-ranked destination and type of oyster to get for years. But right now, they are having even more of a moment than normal.

“The last statistic I have from the state is more than 10 million farmed oysters, however we have hundreds of thousands of wild oysters that are sold annually as well.” Said Nancy Civetta, Wellfleet’s Shellfish Constable.

Wellfleet is a small town located towards the end of Cape Cod in Massachusetts. It’s a quaint beach town with a majority summer population. According to Mass.gov, Wellfleet has a year-round population of about 3,500 people while the summer population increases to approximately 20,000 residents.

Since the town was established in 1763, oyster farming has been an important part of the economy. Officially beginning in the early 1800s, thousands of people have made their living on oystering.

“There are probably close to 160 wild, commercial shell fishermen in Wellfleet. There are 106 farms, and we estimate in total including employees there are about 300 people living in Wellfleet who make their income through shell fishing. Which in a town of 3,000 people that is about 10% of our population. Making it a significant source of year-round income for our little town.” Said Civetta.

Wellfleet oysters are some of the best in the country. They can be found just about anywhere in the country. These oysters are so uniquely popular that there is an annual festival put on by the Wellfleet Spat organization called Oysterfest.

This weekend-long event is populated by thousands of people while thousands of oysters get eaten. It takes place during October and is highly anticipated as so many people come and so many vendors make that last push to make a little extra money before the winter.

October is one of the best months to eat oysters, especially when they are from Wellfleet. But what is the reasoning behind these incredible oysters?

There are five elements, according to SPAT, that make these oysters better than the rest. Wellfleet waters are clean, have high salinity, they are cold, the tides are big and fast, and lastly, the environment is perfect as there is a great amount of food for these oysters. These aspects help to make these oysters better than the rest.

On top of having the perfect environment, this town is full of people who want to farm and make a living off this species.

The process of each farmer is different and unique, and this helps to get a range of shapes when it comes to the oyster, but the delicate flavor tastes the same.

I stepped out onto four different grants this past Saturday to get a first-hand look at this process and learn a little about it.

The beginning of the process is different for different people.

“You can either catch wild set with hats or other devices or buy seed from a hatchery which is what I do. However, it is more money,” said Nick Sirucek, a Wellfleet Oyster and Clam Farmer.

From there it’s just like farming and growing anything. The oysters just need to be taken care of.

“It’s a process that you need live with the season and the weather and biology is a big part of it. Along with running a business, you do day to day taking care of the oysters. We get to grow and harvest some of the best seafood in the world,’ said Wellfleet aquaculture farmer, Bob LaPointe.

The to prepare it is easy but tedious depending on how many oysters that need to be gone through and counted.

“In preparation for the sale of oysters I separate the oysters from the bags. I divide them into two categories, ones that are ready to sell and ones that still need to grow,” said Robert McClellan, a Wellfleet shell fisherman who has been farming oysters since the 1970s.

Through clicking the link, there is a well written piece from the New York Times that follows what it is like strictly being out on the oyster grant and farming, [Oyster Farming](#).

These oysters are found all over the country and are seen in restaurants all over. But the process to getting to the restaurant is not the easiest.

Oyster farmers cannot sell directly to the restaurant without a special permit to do so. Of the four oystermen I spoke to, only one of them had this permit however he rarely, if ever, utilizes this permit.

“I hate to count I feel like it is a waste of time. I think life is short and I don’t want to count 200 oysters and put them in 50 count bags for any amount of money. So, I sell to people who will take the estimated amounts.” Said Jim O’Connell, a Wellfleet Oysterman.

Most of the farmers sell their oysters to a third-party, wholesaler. Although the oyster farmers can sell directly to fish markets, they cannot sell to restaurants. Some of the bigger wholesalers that Wellfleet farmers sell to is Wellfleet Shellfish and Northcoast Seafoods.

These wholesalers then distribute the products all over the country to different restaurants where you can then order and enjoy this Wellfleet delicacy.

Here in Boston, there are plenty of places to get Wellfleet oysters. One is, Summer Shack on Dalton Street.

Here oysters are sold at \$3.50 each. They describe the Wellfleet Oysters as oysters with “deep cups, briny and plump”. Sounds like the perfect oyster to indulge in.

At Summer Shack we got six oysters. The flavor was delicious however the size was small. Most likely petite oysters, which for the price was slightly disappointing because usually Wellfleet Oysters are rather large and plump. However, the flavor made up for the disappointment in the size.

“Wellfleet oysters are the best and by far my favorite. I can never get enough of them.”

Said Keeley Tutty, a Northeastern University first year.