

Life on the Chesapeake

Pioneering company showed oyster aquaculture could be profitable

What started as a fascination with parasites and a desire to create a sustainable business spawned, literally, one of Maryland's pioneering oyster farms.



The husband-and-wife team of Robert Maze and Laurie Landeau created Marinetics Inc./The Choptank Oyster Company in Cambridge in 1999 after earning their doctorate degrees studying parasites and veterinary medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. Research had shown them that oysters raised in aquaculture operations had greater resistance to parasites.

In what was described as the first "untraditional oyster farm on the Eastern Shore," Maze, Landeau and Marinetics General Manager Kevin McClaren created Maryland's first and only private oyster hatchery and an oyster farm on the Choptank River to grow out the spat.

"A lot of people didn't think we could make it work," McClaren said. "Prior to that, Chesapeake oysters were kind of looked down upon. They were all wild harvest which are not as good as farm-raised. Distributors' expectations of Chesapeake oysters was muddy bushel baskets of oysters that sold for next to nothing."

Marinetics spent "years running on the knife edge, financially," he said.

Initially, the company had more product than it could sell at farm-raised prices.

"A big sales week for us used to be 25 boxes. If we only sold 25 boxes of oysters a week now, we would shut the lights off," McClaren said, adding that the company currently sells about 180 boxes a week and more than one million oysters a year.

Today, Marinetics can barely keep up with demand for Choptank Sweets - a meaty oyster with a creamy texture, buttery flavor and moderate salinity.

The company grows the oysters just below the water's surface in floating structures.

Positioning the oysters close to the water's surface "gives you a better oyster. It is a better environment for the oyster because they are up where all the oxygen and the food is," McClaren said.

Even a successful oyster farm, however, still grapples with thin margins, he cautioned. Last year,



Marinetics shut down its hatchery after concluding that it could not compete financially with the publicly run hatchery at Horn Point.

That business decision, however, improved Marinetics' bottomline and has enabled the company to consider expanding its aquaculture operations.