

G.E.I. Oyster Farm/Ocean City Oyster Co.

Trio's 5-year plan is to bring 500,000 oysters to market from farm in the Great Egg Inlet; their first crop, planted in 2019, is maturing this summer

By **DAVID NAHAN**
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OCEAN CITY – If you look down from the walkway on the western side of the Garden State Parkway bridge over the Great Egg Inlet, you can see where a trio of oyster farmers hopes to harvest a half-million Summer Salts annually within five years.

The Ocean City trio, led by Martin Schlembach, planted 400,000 seeds (tiny oysters) in June 2019 over their 6-acre plot abutting Drag Island, which is on the north side of the inlet. Those oysters are maturing this summer.

They have harvested 10,000 Summer Salt oysters so far, some of which have gone onto the menus at the Deauville Inn in Strathmere and Dock's Oyster House in Atlantic City.

The group had hoped to harvest nearly 200,000 this season, but they may not reach that goal with the shortened, restricted business season forced by the COVID-19 pandemic. They are, however, ahead of where they thought they would be when they did the planting in 2019.

When Schlembach talks about planting, he is referring to how the seeds are placed in special mesh bags about 18 inches wide and 36 inches long that allow the water to flow through. The bags are buoyed by floats, attached to moorings, and arrayed in wide arcs just under the surface of the water.

One bag can fit 30,000 seeds, but as the tiny oysters grow, they are separated and transferred to other bags. By the time the oysters are mature, one bag will fit only about 200 oysters.

The growing oysters are in two abutting plots, one comprising 4 acres in a

little cove between the base of the parkway bridge and Drag Island, the other nearby, hugging the shore of the inlet just to the west.

The placement matters for two reasons. One is that they are in "approved" water – tested by the state as clean and appropriate for aquaculture. The second has to do with the keys to growth.

Schlembach explains the diverse plots offer different variables that affect the growth rate. The cove is shallower with mid-current toward the inlet but no current close to Drag Island. The 2-acre plot is deeper and has a lot of current. The more current, the faster the growth because it means more food – phytoplankton and little bits of algae – flowing past the oysters, which are filter feeders.

"So if we want to change growth rates, we can move them to different parts of the farm to make adjustments on how fast or slow they grow," he said. In basic terms, "You put a lot of food in front of one guy and not the other guy, one guy is going to be big and the other is going to be small."

Schlembach and his partners, Keith Zammit, an Ocean City High School science teacher, and Zammit's stepdaughter, Emily Dougan, an OCHS grad, did not do a lot of experimenting with the first crop of 400,000 seeds they planted in 2019, but they are with the 800,000 new seeds they planted this past June. They believe their plots have room for 2 million oysters.

This year they put the seeds in different locations so they can watch their growth rates.

"We're still trying to figure out where our best spots on the farm are," Schlembach said. "That takes years of experience



and trial and error. "

Although factors because of the pandemic may limit this season's take, they originally didn't expect a harvest for one and a half to two years, so when they had oysters maturing at just over a year, they were pleasantly surprised.

The water in the cove is just about 4 feet deep as Zammit demonstrated when he went in chest deep to retrieve a pair of bags – one of mature oysters and the other containing the seeds. The other plot is up to 11 feet deep in one corner so they prefer to wait until low tide to move the bags. (In preparation for Tropical Storm Isaias, which brought with it the tornado that tore through Upper Township Aug. 4, they moved all the bags of oysters into the cove so they would be protected.)

The technique Schlembach, Zammit and Dougan use is called floating culture because of the way the oysters float in bags in the water. They say it is more technologically advanced than some of the other popular farming methods such as dredging and rack and cage.

Floating allows the oysters to get the food that flows past "plus the wave action makes them hit each other and it helps them create a cup," which is the more rounded portion on half of the shell. "An oyster wants to grow long and thin," Schlembach said, but as they bump into each other, it chips off the rib end of the shell and the oysters instead grow a deeper cup.

To check on the oysters' progress, the aqua-farmers take out the bags and put them through a pair of tumblers – roughly 6-foot-long cylinders with holes of increasing size perforating them. The smaller cylinder is for the fledgling oysters, the other for the larger oysters.

As the oysters roll through the tumbler, the smallest ones fall through the smaller holes, then others fall through increasingly larger holes. Those are sorted and put back in bags and back into the water to continue to grow.

"If they make it out the other end," Schlembach said, "they go to the restaurant."

Ready for the restaurant

When the mature oysters come out of the end of the tumbler, "we count them, put them in bags, put them in a slurry of ice mixed with salt water – salt water from this farm, because this is approved water," Schlembach said. "Right over there," he said, pointing to a different part of the inlet, "is not approved. If you put that water in (with the oysters), you don't know what's in it. That's the law. This water is approved so we pull that water in from this lot, with the ice, and then we bring the oysters down to 40 degrees or lower, and we shoot them with a temperature gun. We shoot them after we first harvest them, we shoot them when we first

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At top, Keith Zammit, a partner in the G.E.I. Oyster Farm and Ocean City Oyster Co., takes two bags of oysters from a 4-acre plot in a cove between Drag Island and the Garden State Parkway bridge over Great Egg Inlet. Above, he hands them to business partner Martin Schlembach. Below, Schlembach dumps a bag of mature oysters on a table to examine them. At left, Schlembach, left, and Zammit at the farm.



Courtesy of G.E.I. Oyster Farm/STAR AND WAVE

Emily Dougan, a partner in the G.E.I. Oyster Farm and Ocean City Oyster Co., holds up oysters, above and below, at the farm by Drag Island in Great Egg Inlet.

