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## Island Creek Oyster founder Skip Bennett's rise to culinary fame



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Before the knuckly-shelled morsels from Island Creek Oysters make it onto the white plates of establishments such as the French Laundry, they start out in the chilly, briskly swirling waters of Duxbury Bay in Massachusetts, where founder and CEO Skip Bennett began not only his life but also his career.

“I love the independence of it,” Bennett told *Undercurrent News*, leaning back in his office chair, towards a window overlooking the silvery bay. “I loved being outside, being on the water.”

Today, keeping up with his restaurants, online sales, retail store, sourcing from other farms, hatchery operations and direct distribution channels is enough to keep Bennett busy. But in the beginning, he risked everything for the opportunity to make his own business on the water work.



### Skip Bennett, CEO and founder of Island Creek Oysters

Drawn to the water through some magnetic pull, Bennett started fishing for shellfish in High School and continued in college. After college, the venture became less attractive as its volatility set in. Hurricane Bob hit in 1991, wiping out the mussel population in the bay, and his job dried up with it.

“It took several years before they came back,” Bennett reflected. “At that point, I could picture myself doing mussels for years, then having to paint houses for three years, but that’s not the life I wanted to lead.”

He had scraped by on earnings that were barely enough to buy groceries, while hearing of oyster growers vacationing in Florida, and he started to get curious.

His foray into farming started with mussels. Led by passion, he scraped the knowledge he needed to get by through tips from existing farmers, but just as volumes began to reach a comfortable level in the mid-1990s, a parasite wiped out his farm.

“At that point, I bought oyster seed,” Bennett said.

At the time, he did not know if oysters would grow in the bay, but he pushed his decision forward fast. This was before the Internet, notes Bennett, so he gleaned information through networking with other oyster farmers inside and outside Massachusetts to gather tips and tricks, and reading up on farming. By 1995, he was finally putting oysters on the bottom of the bay, hoping for a good grow-out.

The venture proved challenging, and by the end of the 1990s, “I had so many loans,” Bennett confesses. “We used to joke, ‘what’s one more credit card? We were either going to go broke or we were going to make it.’”

Make it they did. Island Creek's oysters now appear on menus nation-wide, including the French Laundry — a restaurant world authority on gourmet food — which references the Island Creek brand on its menu. Their oysters also crop up at culinary events such as the Boston Food and Wine Expo, where they were featured this year in an oyster and wine pairing.

Before all this happened, the pressure in the early 2000s was to get production volume up.

“We really didn’t worry about demand too much,” Bennett said. “Then, 9/11 happened, and for months we couldn’t sell oysters.”

The setback hit many businesses seen to be in the non-essential category at the time, but it did not last. Back then, there were only a handful of people selling oysters, and chefs were starting to add oysters to menus and finding there just weren’t many suppliers around.

With interest in food origin taking off, Bennett’s venture sparked an immediate connection with Eric Ripert, a famous chef for one of the most celebrated and busy restaurants in New York, Le-Bernardin, when Bennett cold called his kitchen.

“He was so blown away that there was an oyster farm that wanted to sell him oysters [directly],” Bennett said. “So I realized this farm to table movement was a big deal.”

Seemingly starved for supply, Ripert knew exactly what size and depth of shell he wanted to order.

## **Bringing new meaning to 'vertically integrated'**

Bennett's aim to establish a degree of control over his career, which eventually launched Island Creek, has done nothing but grow since the urge first struck. Today, Island Creek Oysters is one of very few oyster farmers that have cropped up along the East Coast in the last couple decades to have its own broodstock program, and its business has been growing every year since its inception 18 years ago.

During that time, the company has gone from selling to just wholesalers to now selling exclusively direct to restaurants and retailers, in addition to running its hatchery and its own restaurants in Boston, Massachusetts, an hour away.

It also recently established a retail store in Duxbury, where it sells the same products it distributes — its own oysters, as well as those it sources from growers up and down the East Coast, as well as from Taylor Shellfish on the West Coast.

The company's hatchery is four years old at this point, bringing depth to Island Creek's realms of knowledge. It is sharing that knowledge with others through its foundation, the Island Creek Oysters Foundation, which has issued publicly available annual reports since 2011 detailing its work to get aquaculture off the ground in regions of need, such as Haiti and Zanzibar. Most of the money spent on such projects comes from events the company puts on.

### **The feed factor**

Island Creek grows six different species of plankton in its hatchery, all intended as feed for the oysters in their infancy stage, before they are released into the waters of Duxbury.

Bennett, a finance major in college, says Island Creek's investment in the hatchery operation — which is by nature quite complex — does not exactly pencil out as a net gain financially yet, but it does provide a degree of security that those who buy their oyster seed do not have.

"It doesn't make sense on paper, but it gives us a degree of control over our own seeds, and in our future here," Bennett said.

Considering its first-hand experience with the devastating impacts of disease, breeding oysters that are well suited for the area is highly prioritized. Three years ago, a disease swept through Duxbury, wiping out not only Island Creek's oysters but also those of Pangea Shellfish and all others in the Duxbury Bay. This was particularly disappointing to Pangea, which had just started farming oysters the year the disease hit.

Yet Island Creek's choice to begin selective breeding is not without risk. If the high performers selected from populations to be parents are genetically related, the offspring can mutate or have defects, just as genetically related humans who mate are prone to have offspring with defects.

To prevent this, Island Creek continues to grow oysters from other genetic lines and cross breed them with its own, and Bennett has other tricks up his sleeve – perhaps using wild oysters as well – to further optimize breeding in the future.

Although it is not necessary to feed oysters in their natural habitat, as they get all the nutrients they need from the ocean water's natural composition, feeding them in the hatchery stage requires producing the plankton they feed on as babies. That's not easy, considering it is not commercially viable to simply use the plankton that exists naturally in the ocean, considering the labor it would take to extract that plankton.

"In order to get this many plankton cells from the ocean water, we'd have to pump billions of gallons of water through here," Bennett said from inside the hatchery, lined with colorful vials of baby oyster food.

Instead, it grows six species of plankton out through eight stages, with each stage taking four days.

Inside the feed growth room, vial upon colorful vile lines the shelves on one side while tubes – at about two feet in diameter – line the walls from floor to ceiling on the other side.

Not only the six different species, but also the many growth stages of each, result in a rainbow-like collection of glass containers, hand sized and larger than life, in the hatchery.

Each plankton species has a different nutritional intake, which changes at different stages of the growth cycle. As the plankton growth advances in each cycle, the color of the liquid it lives in inside the tubes gets darker until farm managers transfer it into a new, bigger container with more liquid, diluting the color down to a lighter version.

Once grown out, each species is a different size, providing the variety of options baby oysters need as they pass from one growth stage to the next.

For a more complete view of the hatchery, as well as Duxbury Bay and the people that make Island Creek run, click into our [photo gallery here](#).

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