Cultivating a new future for Bay’s oyster industry

Editor’s note: This is the second set of articles in a three-part series about Maryland and Virginia wading into oyster aquaculture.

BY RONA KOBELL

If you want to get into the oyster business, you need nerves of steel.

Over the last decade, close to a dozen oyster farms have cropped up in Maryland and Virginia. Everything that could go wrong for them has gone wrong.

One farmer’s oysters were stolen when he put them in an unmarked bed. Another tells of losing much of his early crop to cownose rays. Another encountered the parasite Dermo, which wiped out thousands of dollars of profits in a single season. Still others talked of long waits to acquire the permits to build their operations, or battles with neighbors who were not keen to see oyster floats interrupting their view.

But they stuck it out. Today, they are pioneers in oyster aquaculture, an industry that both Maryland and Virginia want to see grow.

Getting into the industry isn’t an easy sell, especially to the Chesapeake Bay’s dwindling number of watermen. The wild harvest they pursue can be unpredictable, but it’s nothing compared with the uncertainty of aquaculture, where oyster farmers sink thousands of dollars into a crop they hope will be around next year.

“That’s probably going to be the most difficult thing for some watermen, to go from being a harvester who gets up in the morning and takes what Mother Nature gave them to someone who is thinking ahead,” said Don Webster, an extension agent at the University of Maryland who has been working to promote aquaculture for the last three decades. “It’s farming, but it’s more like planting an orchard.”

Jim Wesson, who oversees oyster restoration efforts with the Virginia Marine Resources Commission, said oyster farmers with a get-rich-quick mentality will be disappointed. It took Virginia 30 years to grow clam farms to a $30 million industry, and it will take oyster farmers at least as long to do the same.

“The ones that have been successful, they pay for things as they grow,” Wesson said.

Maryland clam entrepreneur Steve Gordon said the key to success is persistence. He just won a five-year battle with a neighbor over the right to lease bottom in Chincoteague Bay. During his first year of planting clams, he lost most of his crop to hungry rays. Home-improvement projects had to wait as he poured money into upwellers—systems that not only protect shellfish from predators but pump cold water from the bottom, rich with phytoplankton, to feed the young clams.

Now, the Gordon family’s Worcester County aqua farm is a showplace for prospective growers, and Gordon is so confident that he’s branching out into oysters.

“Quite often, in the early years, it’s trial and error,” he said. “You don’t always get it right the first time.”

Here are profiles of six companies who seem to be doing it right, and an examination of how they’ve done it.
Ernie Nichols always wanted to be Uncle Ernie, although not necessarily the way he is now.

Raising his family in Ellicott City and working in the spacecraft industry in Washington, D.C., Nichols craved long weekends on the Shore, catching crabs.

“When I was a kid, at different times, a neighbor might have a sister who had a place. Very rarely would it be the same place. But we always had some place to chicken-neck.”

Nichols decided that, when he was ready, he would build that place, so that it would always be the same place. He would be Uncle Ernie to his children’s friends and his neighbors. In 1999, he bought land along the Big Annemessex River outside of Crisfield, MD, and built his dream house. Shortly thereafter, he heard about a program to grow oysters for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

The CBF experience proved to Nichols that the water provided more than a place to catch crabs. And two years of state water-testing proved that his river was one of the few nearshore places in the area clean enough to grow oysters for human consumption.

“I knew I could grow oysters. I knew they tasted great. I knew we had good water quality and I knew I was going to be retired in a couple of years,” Nichols said.

But what he didn’t know is that it would take three years to obtain the necessary permits, a process Nichols describes as “terrible.” It wasn’t until 2007 that his Tangier Sound Oyster Co.—featuring Uncle Ernie’s Tangier Sound Oysters—was legally operating in the state of Maryland. He sold his first oyster in January 2009.

Over the past few years, Nichols has learned what not to do. His first year, he said, he killed 35,000 oysters. Every time he opened a bag, there were more dead ones. A grower friend in Virginia suggested drying out the bags of oysters for a short period of time and then putting them back in the water. That solved the problem.

Nichols also learned he couldn’t rely on his wife, Bridget, for all of the labor. He hired a couple of biology majors from Salisbury University to do the heavy lifting.

He doesn’t want to get too big—his goal is to sell 1,000–2,000 oysters a week. He’s done almost no marketing, but word has spread—Uncle Ernie’s Tangier Sound Oysters are on the menu at Ryleigh’s, Gertrude’s and Woodberry Kitchen in Baltimore, and the Henlopen City Oyster House in Lewes, DE.

No doubt, Nichols owes his success to persistence. But he is also lucky to have had a full-time job and retirement income. He won’t get rich, but he will stay busy.

“It’s been said that, once people find out you have oysters, you sell them all. And that’s been true,” he said. “I sell every oyster I can grow.”
After a sharp right turn just outside of Cambridge, MD, a narrow road winds down a dirt path into what appears to be an estate worthy of the DuPonts. It continues on to a one-time chicken farm hard by the banks of the Choptank River.

This is Castle Haven, home of Marinetics, and birthplace of the Choptank Sweet oyster. Kevin McClarren, the company’s manager, appreciates the natural beauty. His previous job was growing finfish in a Massachusetts industrial park. And before that, he was a laborer for a brick-laying company, working his way through college and out of a sometimes-rough Northeast Philly neighborhood where, by his own admission, he got into a lot of fistfights.

Growing oysters may be hard work, but McClarren said he knows he’s lucky to be doing it. And he’s dedicated: On a recent morning, he apologized for his grogginess. He had just undergone an endoscopy, and the anesthesia hadn’t completely worn off. His doctor told him not to drive to work, so he took his boat instead.

Marinetices is Maryland’s largest and most successful oyster company, with about 10 million oysters in the water, and sales of about 1 million oysters each year. The company, which began growing its first oysters in 2002, is now turning a profit. Several restaurants in Cambridge, Baltimore, Annapolis and Norfolk carry Choptank Sweets. Even sweeter for McClarren is that he now distributes oysters throughout Philadelphia, including the famous Sansom Street Oyster House, one of his favorite watering holes.

Marinetices was the brainchild of Robert Maze and Laurie Landau, both graduates of the University of Pennsylvania. Maze had a doctorate in parasitology, and was interested in studying the two diseases, MSX and Dermo, that were destroying the Bay’s native oysters. To fund their research, the couple grew some oysters for sale in floats, rather than on the bottom. To their surprise, the oysters thrived. The side business turned into the main event, after taking care of a few details. Marinetics needed permits from...
The Odd Couple: Financier bonds with retired teacher after stopping to talk shop

If it weren’t for the oysters, they probably wouldn’t have gotten together.

David Chamberlain was a retired shop teacher from New York who spent years living on and tinkering with a sailboat in the Hudson River. One day, he saw mussels growing under his dock and decided he might like to grow shellfish, too. New York wasn’t keen on the idea, but when he called Virginia, Chamberlain recalled, “they said, ‘come on down.’” He soon settled in Greenbackville, a town whose name was synonymous with oyster-industry fortunes from the days when the railroad hauled Chincoteague oysters to Baltimore and Philadelphia.

Luke Breza was a brash bond trader who made his money in the financial districts of Paris, New York and London. But with two young children, a passion for sailing and enough money to retire early from full-time work, the Hagerstown native decided to say goodbye to all that. He settled in Easton, enjoying small-town life, and decided to follow his passion and invest in environmentally friendly businesses that also had a potential to make money.

The story might have ended there, except Chamberlain left Greenbackville for the Maryland side of the Coastal Bays. After many years of trial and error with different locations, he began growing oysters in Scotts Landing, in the shadow of Snow Hill, on 7 acres of water column leased from the state. It was there that Breza discovered him in 2004.

“Luke went to the aquaculture office. He got a list of every oyster farm in Maryland and visited them. There weren’t that many,” Chamberlain said. “And then Luke came back over, and he never left.”

Breza’s infusion of capital, sweat equity and business acumen turned what was a side business for Chamberlain into a full-time, year-round oyster farm. They called the company Great Eastern Shellfish Co., and began selling the oysters to nearby restaurants as Snow Hills, in keeping with the tradition of naming oysters after the place where they’re grown. The chefs raved about the oysters, which retain that famous salty flavor of Chincoteague Bay as well as a special mineral taste because they’re growing in Box Iron Creek. In spring 2008, Breza took the oysters to a tasting contest in Providence, RI. When they finished runner-up, the Maryland Department of Agriculture issued a press release.

The firm’s fame expanded when Maryland Gov. Martin O’Malley made it the first stop on a tour of Worcester County in 2008. After visiting, O’Malley learned that Virginia had a thriving aquaculture industry, while Maryland had almost none. That visit solidified the path to the most significant change in the aquaculture law in 100 years.

Although it still isn’t easy to obtain permits, future growers won’t have to endure Chamberlain’s five-year odyssey.

Like Marinetics, Great Eastern grows
The Chesapeake’s shores used to be thick with oyster-shucking houses. They employed hundreds of people, and had a culture all of their own. Men—and it was mostly men—would sit around a table and pry the salty bivalves out of thick shells, telling stories and singing until their shift ended.

After diseases all but destroyed the wild harvest in the 1980s, most of the shucking houses closed. Those that remained had to rely on product from the Gulf of Mexico, which supplied most of the oysters in the United States until recently.

Lake “Lakey” Cowart and Ronald “Ronnie” Bevans were among the survivors. Cowart owns Cowart Seafood Co. in Lottsburg, VA; Bevans’ oyster company is based a few miles away in Kinsale, VA.

But Cowart and Bevans worried that much of the Virginia industry was one Gulf Coast disaster away from losing its supply. They wondered if there was a way to raise oysters locally.

The Virginia Seafood Council seemed headed in that direction. In 2005, the group was experimenting with Asian oysters that were being considered as a replacement for the native oyster. For the experiment, they needed sterile native oysters for comparison. A sterile native oyster can grow much faster than a native wild oyster because it puts all of its energy into growth, and none into reproduction. And unlike reproductive oysters, which are only eaten in “R” months because they are runny from reproduction in the summer, sterile oysters can be eaten all year long.

Virginia Institute of Marine Science oyster geneticist Standish Allen, who invented the sterile oyster, called a triploid because it has three sets of chromosomes, provided the stock for the experiments, one of which was conducted at Bevans’ Kinsale plant.

Through the experiments, the elder statesmen of the oyster industry met one of the new guard—A.J. Erskine, a Virginia Institute of Marine Science graduate who eschewed a career in research because he wanted to put his ideas in the water. Erskine understood the science of how to breed oysters. But could he develop a large-scale planting operation for both companies, so that eventually they could supply themselves?

After Hurricane Katrina, Cowart and Bevans saw no reason not to try. They hired Erskine, now 38, to build a joint aquaculture operation. Though Cowart and Bevans maintain their own boats, leases and shucking operations, they share product. The oysters begin life in a hatchery. A paddle-wheel upweller at Cowart’s place nurses the oysters until they are large enough to go on the leased beds. Then, workers put the oysters aboard one of two boats—Cowart’s Fat Spat and Bevans’ Barnes Point—and deliver them to the leased beds. They

**LEGACIES continues on page 10**
**The Marketers:**
*Cousins unite area growers to create a Bay ‘brand’ that’s hot across the U.S.*

In 2002, Richmond resident Travis Croxton had a great job at the Federal Reserve Bank. His cousin, Ryan Croxton, was working as a freelance writer. Neither had a notion of becoming an oyster farmer until their fathers approached them with a proposal: The 110-year-old lease on their grandfather’s vast Middle Peninsula oyster grounds was about to expire. Would the boys be interested in doing something with it?

“It was the last thing on our mind until they brought it to our attention that we might lose a bit of history,” Travis Croxton recalled. “It was just going to be a hobby.”

It didn’t take the Croxtons long to figure out they could do more. An epiphany came while eating at New York’s famous Grand Central Oyster Bar. The menu featured about 20 varieties of oysters from within three miles of each other in Massachusetts. There was one oyster from the Bay. It was called the Chesapeake Bay oyster.

The Croxtons wondered why Bay oysters couldn’t offer products as different as Wellfleets and Blue Points. To get in the game, they knew they had to get the attention of the most high-profile chefs. So Ryan Croxton called Eric Ripert, host of the PBS show, *Avec Eric,* and chef at the top restaurant in New York, Le Bernardin. To their surprise, Chef Eric had a secretary, who returned the call. A meeting was set up. Oysters were consumed. And before long, Rappahannock River Oysters landed on the fanciest menu in Manhattan.

The Croxtons wondered why Bay oysters couldn’t offer products as different as Wellfleets and Blue Points. To get in the game, they knew they had to get the attention of the most high-profile chefs. So Ryan Croxton called Eric Ripert, host of the PBS show, *Avec Eric,* and chef at the top restaurant in New York, Le Bernardin. To their surprise, Chef Eric had a secretary, who returned the call. A meeting was set up. Oysters were consumed. And before long, Rappahannock River Oysters landed on the fanciest menu in Manhattan.

The Croxton cousins moved on to Craft, whose owner, Tom Colicchio, is one of the most famous chefs in the United States, thanks to his hosting duties on Bravo’s *Top Chef.* Soon, Colicchio was tooling around Topping, VA, in a Porsche, and including the

Croxtons’ company in both a new cookbook and on an online travelogue of the best artisan farmers between Atlanta and New York. They sent him home with a Rappahannock River onesie for his soon-to-be born son. He sent them back of a picture of the baby wearing it.

But if the cousins “Forrest Gumped” their way into initial success, as Travis Croxton likes to say, the growing of the business has been anything but haphazard. The cousins earned *Food and Wine*’s prestigious Tastemaker Award honoring those who have changed “the world of food” by age 35. They have also been featured on the acclaimed PBS series, *Chefs Afield.*

In 2008, the Croxtons hired Anthony Marchetti, a University of Virginia graduate with strong Rappahannock River ties, to manage their main farm in Topping. They have two other farms as well as several co-ops that raise oysters. They sell between 30,000 and 40,000 oysters a week to places as far away as Las Vegas and Honolulu. And demand is only picking up since the Gulf oil spill, especially as many suppliers in the market raised their price.

“A lot of people are price gouging now. We’re not,” Marchetti said. “And our customers definitely appreciate that.”

In addition to branding and selling their own oysters under the

**MARKETERS continues on page 8**
Sheets of galvanized black wire sit in neat piles in Doug McMinn’s front yard on Virginia’s Middle Peninsula. Nearby, in a covered workshop, two men measure, cut and construct flat, rectangular cages. They are working fast—a new order has just come in for 40 cages.

Seven years ago, when he left his job as director of marine science at Christchurch School, a college preparatory school in Christchurch, VA, to try oyster farming, McMinn never thought he’d be in the oyster equipment business. At first, McMinn’s company, the Chesapeake Bay Oyster Co., got cages from Massachusetts and Maine, where aquaculture has thrived for decades. But Virginia required the cages to be 12 inches off the bottom, and the New England cages weren’t built to those specifications.

So McMinn built his own, a system where a grower can nestle a bag in one side of the cage for easy opening and culling. Then he sold his product to other aquaculture entrepreneurs in Maryland and Virginia, as well as to home growers. They gave him feedback, and he refined the cages so they no longer require bags. Over the years, he made changes to the design, the materials and the shape. Today, he is the region’s largest supplier of oyster cages.

McMinn and his partner, Irv Spurlock, also designed an oyster tumbler that several companies use to give their oysters a rounded, half-shell shape.

About half of his business revenue comes from selling cages. And he is still one of his own best customers. The company has 400 acres of leased bottom in the Rappahannock River, near the tiny town of Wake. That’s about 3 million oysters in the water, and a million sold each year. But with the cages on the bottom, no one can see them.

“We wanted to be out of sight, out of mind,” McMinn said as he steered his boat over his leases. “We’re wide open here, but we ride it out, because we’re on the bottom.”

McMinn’s oysters begin life in a custom-built upweller, then move to the river when they’re a half-inch.

A native of Wilmington DE, McMinn fell in love with the Rappahannock as a child on visits to his grandmother’s home. When he was 7, he found an arrowhead on the beach. When he was older, he would sit on the Rappahannock’s banks, watching the deadrises come in. After graduating from college, he moved there and landed at Christchurch. McMinn decided to get into oyster farming, he said, because he was tired of talking about saving the Bay and wanted to do something.

At first, McMinn’s wife helped him in the office. When she became...
**Odd Couple from page 4**

its oysters in floats. Chamberlain sleeps in a small shack on the property to tend the crop. Breza stays over sometimes, too. Chamberlain has built a hatchery, but it’s not yet operational.

Their first year, they produced 30,000 oysters. By 2007, they were up to 80,000.

In September 2008, they were on track for 200,000 when a Dermo epidemic wiped out nearly their entire crop. “It almost put us out of business,” Breza recalled. “We hibernated as much as we could. We took no salaries. Everything we sold went into our rent. I even had to lend the farm some money.”

But Great Eastern bounced back.

**MARKETERS from page 6**

Rappahannock River label, the Croxtons sell Doug McMinn’s oysters, which they also call Rappahannocks. Other brands in their stable include Snow Hills, WitchDucks from the Lynnhaven, and York River Oysters, which oyster farmer Tommy Leggett grows.

“They are providing a shopping list all over the United States as to what a Chesapeake Bay oyster tastes like,” Leggett said.

The Croxtons have found more than just a steady supply of oysters. They’ve found their growers are more collaborators than competitors, believing that a rising Chesapeake Bay oyster tide will lift all of their boats.

Chamberlain got a Department of Agriculture grant to build a better float with the goal of less fouling, and the Dermo problem has subsided.

“Sometimes it seems like we have a difference of opinion, but it all works out,” Chamberlain said. “We’re both workaholics, and we’re too dumb to get out.”
fighter from page 3

four state agencies as well as the Army Corps of Engineers. Then it had to tangle with its neighbors: One, a wealthy Baltimore lawyer, riled up the community about the oyster floats. Marinetics now has good relations with most neighbors in the cove—and the wealthy lawyer’s home is languishing on the market.

Then there was the matter of selling the oysters. McClarren has a degree in marine science, so growing oysters wasn't a problem. Marketing them was another story. Fortunately, seafood distributor Billy Martin paid a visit after reading about the company in the local paper.

“It didn’t take too long into the conversation with Mr. Martin to realize that pounding on the doors of restaurants was a job better left to salesmen,” McClarren recalled.

The first step in marketing was a distinctive brand name. The company decided on Choptank Sweets to differentiate them from the saltier oyster that comes from Chincoteague.

McClarren may not be knocking on doors, but he’s still the company pitchman. He shucks oysters at restaurants in Baltimore and Philadelphia in the hope that the customers will demand the product, and has been featured in a Food Network Canada show.

“It was a gamble, to call it a sweet,” McClarren said, “but I think it really worked.”
LEGACIES from page 5

grow to market size in about a year.

At present, the aquaculture-raised product accounts for about 15 percent of the companies’ shucked product. Erskine would like to get that number to 50 percent. If he can, there’s no reason other shucking houses couldn’t replicate the Cowart/Bevans model and become their own suppliers.

“What we need to do is show that it’s viable. I’m not sure we’re paving the way, but at least we’re saying to the industry, there is another way to do this,” Erskine said.

Erskine had high hopes for the Asian oyster, but after five years of study and $15 million, the states and the federal government decided not to introduce it. He has no regrets about leaving the academic world for the real one, where an idea can go from a few sentences on a piece of paper to a business growing millions of oysters in five years.

“The difference with aquaculture is that we’re sustainable, both with the heritage they’ve built and the environment,” Erskine said. “To take my degree and use it as much as possible to make that happen is very gratifying.”