



Moondancers... Growing Oysters Indoors?

When I heard there was an oyster farm in Maine growing oysters indoors, I had to see it to believe it. I have been on a lot of plant tours in my more than three-decades long seafood career, but none as impressive as the one I took in late March at Mook Sea Farms on the Damariscotta River in Walpole, Maine. It was like...oyster aquaculture meets NASA!



Owner Bill Mook with a prime specimen brood stock oyster

Bill Mook started growing oysters in 1983, way back before anyone thought there was money in it. In the 35 years since, he has become one of the leading authorities in the country on oyster genetics, aquaculture, and ocean acidification. We drove three hours north of Boston, way up the snowy Maine coast, to a picturesque town on the Damariscotta River.

Mook Sea Farms, located on the banks of the river, is a completely “vertically integrated company” — from spawning its own brood stock in its own lab on site, to feeding and growing the larvae until they are ready to set, to setting the larvae on microculch, and then maintaining complete control of the grow-out process until the oysters reach marketable size. What takes other farms in the area 30 months to grow a three-inch oyster, Mook is closing in on doing in just 12 months!!



Growing algae for oyster food

Water enters the hatchery pumped directly from the Damariscotta River and is then filtered to remove any phytoplankton and zooplankton. That water is “gin clear” — perfect for growing oysters.

The larvae are “set” on microscopic particles of oyster shells and then “screened” weekly to separate fast growers from slower growers. The oysters are fed a rich diet of phytoplankton daily, formulated and grown on site, and water is then forced up through the oysters in a process called “upwellers.” Looking closely at the “coke bottles” in which they are grown, one will see dark horizontal lines. Those are marks that show how much the oysters grow in one day!!!

Mook Sea Farms specializes in producing deep cup oysters. The smaller ones, under three inches, are



In the indoor oyster “pool”...

...hundreds of thousands of oysters are stacked floor to ceiling with a 10-foot deep, 75,000-gallon oyster pool underneath the floor. Every aspect of an oyster’s life can be controlled in this room. It is absolutely mind blowing.

I haven’t even scratched the surface of the technology used in this operation. The company bought a gigantic centrifuge and is creating its own high-quality frozen phytoplankton “paste” for sale to other hatcheries around the country. When you mix the paste in water, the little phytoplankton wake up and start swimming around as if nothing ever happened!

Mook Sea Farms is “light years” ahead of any other oyster farm I have ever seen. I highly recommend a trip up there. But if that’s not possible, order some Moondancers and see for yourself!!!!



One day’s growth

marketed as “petites.” Bill says they sell like hotcakes, and he cannot keep enough of them in the house! We tried the Moondancers at the Eventide Restaurant in Portland, and the oysters were fat and delicious!

TIM SUGHRUE is executive vice president and founding member of Congressional Seafood Company. He holds a BS from North Carolina State University in Wildlife Biology and Fishery Science. He is a former research biologist for the Maryland DNR, has worked as a full-time commercial waterman, and has sold almost a billion dollars worth of seafood in his career.