

Barnegat Bay

Leads Renaissance of Oyster Aquaculture

summit house living

By Mason Levinson, Summit House

Aerial view of Rose Cove on Barnegat Bay. (photo credit Chris Rusert)



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Forty North Oyster Farms co-owner Matt Gregg tends to his farm. (photo credit Mason Levinson)

Sugar Shack. Sloop Point. Wildling Bastard.

No, they're not local cover bands, rather they're the fruit of a hard-earned East Coast renaissance story: the return of oyster aquaculture.

Just over an hour south of Summit and a few miles east sits Barnegat Bay, where oyster farmers brave the elements just about all year around to cultivate distinct, delicious oysters—as well as a New Jersey industry that's once again flourishing after generations of decline.

“I'm envious of land farmers,” joked Matt Gregg, co-owner of Forty North Oyster Farms, while standing waist-deep in low 40-degree water during a visit from the team at Summit House. “I'm starting to shiver.”

There are about a dozen oyster-farming operations in New Jersey these days, much fewer than the 50 or so such growers in Rhode Island, but nonetheless a sign of a healthy industry that was all but extinct a decade earlier.

In the early 1900s, Barnegat Bay boomed with oyster production, rivaling the largest East Coast



A Rose Cove oyster, fresh out of the Barnegat Bay and delicious. (photo credit Mason Levinson)

production areas. Over-harvesting, environmental issues and disease changed that, and it's just recently rebounded, providing a source of fresh, local cuisine for restaurants all over the area.

Forty North operates as part of the Barnegat Bay Oyster Collective, a group of oyster farms that share a combined mission to “encourage peo-

ple to know where their food comes from, to support small farmers, and to make New Jersey an oyster destination once again.”

Members of the Collective collaborate on farming techniques and education, building on knowledge gained throughout the generations while working together to create better-tasting oysters, more efficiently.

Oysters aren't caught; they are cultivated over anywhere from 18 months to three years. The process begins with taking baby oysters, known as seed, putting them in fine mesh bags and growing them while protected in fiberglass tanks called upwellers at a land-based nursery. As the oysters grow, feeding on nutrients from the flow of water, they're moved to increasingly larger mesh bags, eventually placed in the sea and hand-tumbled every six weeks to help create the ideal dense, deep shell.

There are about 14,000 protected acres of nearby, nutrient-rich meadows and marshland, feeding the oysters with every high tide. Among the five acres, the team at Summit House spent visiting, about four million oysters were growing.

Just like the wine grape, oysters are going to taste different based on the region in which they're grown, including diverse areas just within Barnegat Bay, according to Summit House managing partner Dylan Baker.

“As a restaurant focused on what's in season and what's local, there couldn't be a better fit for us than the story of Barnegat Bay,” says Baker. “These oysters, local and delicious, are truly a sunken treasure for New Jerseyans.”



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