

En Voyage

Aurigny's leisure and business magazine

ISSUE 26



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WONDERFUL
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OYSTERS – THE BEGINNING OF LIFE

Guernsey Sea Farms is celebrating 40 years in business. It's a labour of love for owners Penny and Mark Dravers.

If you've ever eaten an oyster at a restaurant in the UK or locally, chances are it started its life in the quarry at Bordeaux, where Guernsey Sea Farms is tucked away.

One of the many hidden gems of local businesses, Guernsey Sea Farms is a long-standing, successful operation that has developed a global reputation. It is one of two oyster hatcheries in the British Isles and produces more than 50 million baby oysters (or seed) a year, shipping to oyster farms around the world, including Canada, South Africa and Hong Kong.

'Oyster farming is fully sustainable and organic – no antibiotics, no fertilizers – just natural, no waste,' says Mark. 'There is an increasing demand for seed thanks to interest in locally-sourced food.'

Mark, with a degree in mechanical engineering, designed and built the complex system of tanks, pipes, pontoons and pumps in the sea water filled quarry, which is also a haven for wildlife, including kingfishers, ibis and cormorants.

He says he literally 'reinvented the wheel', referring to the paddlewheel that quietly turns at the end of one of the pontoons, a design that has now been sold all over the world.

THE HATCHERY

The peaceful setting is background to the main thrust of the business, namely rearing oysters. Penny, whose father was a professor of seaweed, is qualified in environmental sciences, so is well-placed to understand the highly scientific elements in rearing oysters from scratch.

Guernsey's clean, unpolluted water – vital to rearing oysters and other bivalves – is the main reason they chose to set up the business here. The water is also free of the pests and diseases that affect bivalve shellfish, a huge selling point for worldwide exports. Interestingly, a side-line of the business is the export of seawater to laboratories in the UK and Europe

for environmental monitoring. Oysters clean seawater by filtering micro-algae and other particles in murky water. A single oyster can filter up to 200 litres of water each day.

THE PROCESS

In the first two or three weeks of their lives oysters are smaller than pinheads and swim around in specially treated seawater for about three weeks before they develop a natural urge to fix themselves onto something – in the wild this would be to a rock or other shell. In the hatchery, it is to the sides of the tank. For the operation to run smoothly, it is crucial to feed the tiny oysters on specially selected and cultured microalgae. Test tubes and bubbling flasks of green, brown and yellow algae line shelves in the laboratory while a series of tanks outside the main building are used for producing this vital algae in much larger quantities.

From the tiny, sand-like seedlings, the oysters grow to a size where they can be transferred to tanks outside and eventually placed in aluminium boxes on a pontoon. Here, algae rich seawater is pumped through them by means of a paddlewheel which is so efficient that it can move 30 tonnes of seawater a minute on just a one horsepower motor.

From there they are graded regularly into different sizes before being chilled and packed dry into polythene boxes for airfreight.

'The importance of airfreight from Guernsey is not always fully appreciated,' says Mark. 'We deliver the next day to most customers in the UK and can deliver to nearly anywhere in the world within 48 hours.' In 2022, the company sent 25 million oysters to Vancouver alone, via Southampton.

THE FUTURE

Diversification of the business has seen the company start producing clam seed for Italian and Spanish customers, and seaweed production has also been suggested. There are also opportunities in the water testing side of the business where improvements could be made to laboratory techniques used.

As for Penny and Mark, they freely admit that they have absolutely loved building a successful business. But after 40 years, they are at the stage where they are looking for some new blood, someone with energy and enthusiasm, someone who would continue to grow a business that makes such an innovative contribution to the aquaculture industry of the island.

Oyster hatchery, anyone?





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