1.05.2012

The Local Food Report: pitting oysters

Jim O' Connell has a root cellar. Like most root cellars, it's underground. It has a dirt floor, concrete walls, and a concrete slab for a ceiling. There are four little windows just above ground level that Jim can open to regulate the temperature, and at the entrance, there's a chute to send things down.
It's pretty normal. Only instead of being full of root vegetables, it's piled with oysters, floor to ceiling:

This practice is called "pitting." Apparently it's a pretty old tradition—Wellfleet oystermen were doing it back when Thoreau visited the Cape back in the 1840s and 50s. (The book was published in 1865, three years after his death. Thank you, Ed!) The man told Thoreau that he kept his oysters in the cellar all winter:

"Without anything to eat or drink?" I asked.

"Without anything to eat or drink," he answered.

"Can the oysters move?"

"Just as much as my shoe."

This is how Jim's oysters spend the winter, too. He brings them down around this time of year—the exact timing depends on the weather. He watches the forecast constantly, every morning and every night, and when it looks like its going to be 20 degrees or below for four nights in a row with not a whole lot of wind, it's time. That's because that kind of weather, with the salinity in Wellfleet harbor, means ice. And ice means mangled gear—moved and heaved racks and bags and baskets of oysters scattered all over, maybe even dragged over someone else's grant, maybe broken.

In fact, it's really not an issue of the oysters—wild ones survive winter in the harbor just fine. It's a gear thing. Jim's oysters sit in bags and baskets on racks 18 inches off the flats, which makes them very
susceptible to things like high winds and ice. And while it might sound crazy to move a living thing into a root cellar, the oysters don't mind. They don't eat during the winter, and surprisingly, they don't even need to be in the water. They just need to be moist and around 35 degrees F.

Growers have been pitting oysters since Thoreau's time at least. Jim says he read somewhere about Wellfleetians packing oysters into the banks of Duck Creek using salt hay. Even when they weren't using so much gear, Jim says, it made sense, because if you were farming oysters in a specific part of the harbor, an iceberg could come and scatter them all over.

When the first big tides in March roll around, Jim brings his roughly 250,000 oysters back out of the cellar and onto his grant. It's a lot of work, but for someone like him—who welds his own racks—it's worth it. Most growers agree, but not everyone pits. Some people leave their gear out and take the risk, and others grow their oysters on the bottom. So if you're eating Wellfleet oysters this time of year, most likely, they're either bottom culture or wild. We'll have to wait until spring to get a taste of what's in the pits.

11 comments:

Anonymous said...

twenty eight

January 5, 2012 at 8:18 AM

Anonymous said...

Very interesting!

January 5, 2012 at 8:39 AM

Teresa Parker said...

I've always wondered what Jim had down in that root cellar... Gold, turns out!

People have told us about the oysters coming off the flats in winter, but it's a real treat to learn how it works. It's interesting to me that this is not just a new shellfish farming technology, but a practice that goes way back.

Thanks for a glimpse of the work and care that goes into raising oysters Wellfleet... no wonder they grow into such big and beautiful mouthfuls.

I hear there are some oystermen who raise their oysters in "deep water," too. Do they remove their oysters too? Or do they do something else to ensure their survival through winter's storms?
Elspeth said...

Teresa,

Based on what Jim said I think most oystermen with deep water grants do bottom culture, so they don't have the gear issue and leave their stuff in. He said he'd do bottom culture if he had a bigger grant.

Gold is right!

xo
Elspeth

January 7, 2012 at 8:52 AM

Ed Miller said...

Nice post, Elspeth. I like the selection from Thoreau very much.

One small correction: Thoreau didn't visit Wellfleet in the 1860s. The book "Cape Cod" was published in 1865, three years after his death, and was based on four separate trips he made to the Cape between October 1849 and June 1857.

It's a great book, though it got mixed notices when it came out. The Yale Review wrote: "Mr. Thoreau is hard and scornful, as we might expect from a stoney-eyed observer who looks through nature and finds no God."

January 7, 2012 at 1:51 PM

Anonymous said...

Laurie W.--West Chatham
Fascinating! Last Saturday (NY Eve), a friend brought us oysters he had raked that morning from Chatham waters. They took a lot of cleaning, but were delicious! I will forward him your article.

Do you know why they call it "pitting?"

January 7, 2012 at 5:30 PM

Anonymous said...

Elspeth,

He has a chute, not a shoot.

January 7, 2012 at 11:52 PM
Elspeth said...

Thank you Ed and Anonymous for the very helpful corrections. And Anonymous, might you be my mother? Just a hunch.

And finally Laurie, Yum!

January 8, 2012 at 4:59 PM

Jane said...

Hi Teresa!
My name is Jane and I'm with Dwellable.
I was looking for blog posts about West Chatham to share on our site and I came across your post...If you're open to it, shoot me an email at jane(at)dwellable(dot)com.
Hope to hear from you :)  
Jane

July 31, 2012 at 4:33 PM

Jane said...

Hey there,
My name is Jane. I was looking for blog posts about West Chatham to feature on Dwellable and I came across your post...If you're open to it, shoot me an email at jane(at)dwellable(dot)com.
Hope to hear from you :) 
Jane

July 31, 2012 at 4:59 PM

Online High School Diploma said...

I recently added your site to my top picks. I truly appreciate perusing your posts. A debt of gratitude is in order regarding your Great post and I am anticipating perused your next post.

March 9, 2015 at 1:52 AM