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 Intelligence
Intelligence

Images: Bangs Island Mussels in Casco Bay, Maine

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31 October 2016 James Wright



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The Bangs Island Mussels barge is typically moored off of Clapboard Island in Casco Bay, Maine, but during October it was tied up 4 miles away, at Maine Wharf in Portland, for repairs and equipment upgrades. When the barge is fully operational on harvesting days, five workers will man the floating structure to haul ropes from which

the mussels are removed, graded, inspected and placed on ice until they reach a land-based processing facility for debyssing, washing and further inspection.



Wild Ocean Aquaculture LLC President and co-owner Matt Moretti stands on his company's dock in Portland, Maine, holding a Spanish-style pegged rope on which the mussels are attached and then affixed to floating rafts before being submerged into the water for grow-out. In one of the buildings behind Moretti, the company shares processing space with Upstream Trucking, a local seafood distributor that supplies seafood to a small stable of fine dining restaurants in the city. Portland is consistently named one of the top foodie destinations in the United States, and many of them have Bangs Island Mussels on the menu.



A series of new “fuzzy” ropes made of polyethylene will soon replace the ropes currently in use. These ropes are much lighter, particularly when wet, said Moretti, and will make the labor-intensive job of harvesting and processing a little bit easier.



Shown here are some new and lightly used oyster bags, or cages, for growing bivalve shellfish. Moretti, who recently traveled to Japan with a delegation of Maine shellfish growers to witness scallop farming and processing, has worked with various types of shellfish in the past. Scallop farming may be in the future for the company, said Moretti, but the idea is still in the exploratory stage.

Moretti's boat, built for lobster fishing, steams east out of Portland Harbor toward Clapboard Island, where four of Wild Ocean Aquaculture's 10 total mussel rafts are located. It's a beautiful and unseasonably warm October day in southern Maine.

Just south of Clapboard Island, Maine, are four of Wild Ocean Aquaculture's 10 total mussel rafts. On the approach you can easily see the outer "fencing" designed to ward off the mussel rafts' top predator: eider ducks. "Seals are abundant, but don't bother the rafts," said Moretti, as one of the curious creatures swims nearby.

Each raft can produce up to 50,000 to 60,000 pounds of mussels every two years, said Moretti. The company is also growing sugar kelp at its site off of Bangs Island. Seaweed will become a bigger part of what the company does, as the market for the product expands, Moretti said.

When Moretti bought the company in 2010, there were three rafts producing about 50,000 pounds a year.

Moretti ties up his boat to one of the mussel rafts to check on the lines and make sure the recent rains and high winds didn't cause any damage.

This year, Moretti said the company's 10 rafts will produce about 200,000 pounds. In three more years, he hopes to reach 250,000 pounds.

When the mussels mature, each rope can weigh up to 200 pounds, making the job a physically demanding one. Moretti and his father (and company co-owner) Gary currently have two full-time employees, and four part-time employees.

The ropes attract a lot of other ocean life, including seaweeds, barnacles, limpets and ascidians (which are orange in color). “Each line is like its own little ecosystem that mimes the benthic habitat,” said Moretti.

About half of Bangs Island Mussels' supply is sold in the state of Maine, and through a handful of distributors the product has found regular buyers in markets as far away as Chicago, Denver and Atlanta, said Moretti.

The curvy lines on mussel shells are not unlike tree rings, said Moretti, in that they tell a story about growth over time. The brighter-colored line on this shell could reflect a time of low feeding activity for the mussels, like the cold winters Maine is known for.

Moretti checks in on a monitoring device used by researchers at the University of New England in nearby Biddeford, Maine. UNE is monitoring the environmental conditions at the farm, including water temperatures, dissolved oxygen, salinity and light – “the conditions for our success,” said Moretti.

“We fit in well” with the working waterfront in Portland, said Moretti. “As wild seafood declines, I’m hopeful that aquaculture will take part of that place, for the working waterfront jobs that fishing has filled for years.”

Six years under new ownership, niche shellfish supplier has expanded the operation’s production and market distribution

[slides]

This photo slideshow offers a closer look at what restaurants in Maine and beyond are raving about: Bangs Island Mussels. Six years after purchasing the company from its founder, Matt Moretti says the niche shellfish supplier has expanded its annual production by nearly four times, has broadened its market distribution beyond the local region and is incorporating sweet kelp culture as well.

All photos and captions by Global Aquaculture Advocate Editor James Wright.

Editor’s note: If you would like your aquaculture operation to be featured in an “Images” slide show, please email the *Global Aquaculture Advocate* at editor@gaalliance.org.

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The Global Aquaculture Alliance's Standards Oversight Committee (SOC) met on Saturday, Oct. 24, 2015, at the Four Seasons Hotel in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. GAA's annual GOAL conference will be held at the hotel this week.

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A study by University of Southampton Ph.D. candidate Alison Sky Simmance aims to investigate the role of small scale aquaculture in Malawi, a country where the demand for farmed fish is becoming more urgent in light of declining capture fisheries and high dependency on fish a vital source of animal protein.

Intelligence

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The Global Aquaculture Alliance's annual GOAL (Global Outlook for Aquaculture Leadership) conference was held September 19-22 in Guangzhou, China. Click through this photo gallery taken during the three days of the annual event.

Intelligence

[Cup size matters, but for oysters, branding matters more](#)

To name an oyster is to give birth to a brand, essential to stand out in today's raw bar scene. The briny bite-sized morsels are arguably seafood's sexiest offerings, but a memorable moniker (and a quality product) is what keeps them on the menu.

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The Responsible Seafood Advocate supports the Global Seafood Alliance's (GSA) mission to advance responsible seafood practices through education, advocacy and third-party assurances.

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