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Young aquaponics, aquaculture company gets big boost

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13 June 2016 James Wright



Prize-winning Fluid Farms in Maine grows hybrid striped bass, which provide fertilizer for a budding produce greenhouse



A close-up look at Fluid Farms' hybrid striped bass, which provide the nutrients for the company's growing aquaponics operation in Dresden, Maine. The fish not only feed the plants but are sold to local restaurants and markets. Photo courtesy of Fluid Farms.

Two young entrepreneurs who run a small aquaponics produce and farmed fish operation in Maine can now dare to dream a little bigger, thanks to a winning pitch in an annual business contest that netted them \$50,000.

Fluid Farms, an aquaponics produce grower in Dresden, Maine, leans on multi-trophic aquaculture to provide crucial nutrients for its heirloom lettuce products – butterhead, red sales, green oakleaf and Rouge d’Hiver – that are in high demand in a state where the words fresh, local and sustainable appear on virtually every menu and sidewalk sandwich board.

The true emerging stars of this two-man show in rural Maine are the plant-fertilizing fish. Fluid Farms is the first and only producer of hybrid striped bass – a cross between the striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) and the white bass (*M. chrysops*) – in the state, and the local market is buzzing about the product’s bona fides.

“Since Maine has no commercial fishery for striped bass, our fish are a great alternative to out-of-state bass. The southern Maine market has been buying our fish as fast as we can produce them,” company co-founder Tyler Gaudet told the *Advocate*.

Production of both produce and fish should increase soon. At the fourth annual LaunchPad competition – run by Gorham Savings Bank in early June – Gaudet out-pitched four other finalists to win a \$50,000 prize that he said will go to a new heating system for the company’s 36,000-square-foot greenhouse, allowing them to save money and invest in the business. Gaudet bested four other finalists, who were all judged on scalability, viability, uniqueness, management team and presentation skills. Each finalist got seven minutes to make their pitch and a five-minute question-and-answer session with the judges.

I take a very ecological approach to aquaculture. I observe what works in nature and try to mimic that within our aquaponics system.

Despite being indoors, Fluid Farms’ facility operates on a seasonal basis due to the harsh winter conditions in Maine. Spring, summer and fall are all about lettuce, but when winter is coming, efforts turn to hardier plants like bok choy, kale and mustard greens. (Fluid Farms is also Maine’s only aquaponics producer to have gained Maine Organic Farmers and Growers Association certification.)

Growing the fish, however, is a year-round endeavor.

“There are two layers of plastic greenhouse film between us and winter,” explained Gaudet, which is a major reason why he and co-founder Jackson McLeod switched from growing tilapia to striped bass last year. “Tilapia really don’t work in a year-round system like ours in terms of cost-versus-benefit. We drop our water temperatures quite a bit in winter, which slows fish growth. The bass are much more valuable and we can raise them at lower temperatures in winter, which saves us thousands of dollars in heating costs.”



Fluid Farms leans on multi-trophic aquaculture to provide crucial nutrients for its heirloom lettuce

products – butterhead, red sales, green oakleaf and Rouge d’hover. Photo courtesy of Fluid Farms.

The hybrid striped bass are sourced from a hatchery in the southern United States, Gaudet said. The fish then grow out in four tanks, and are fed three times a day to promote growth. Starting at roughly two inches in length, the fish are grown to 1 to 2 pounds each.

“We grow two age classes of bass within each system, so that balances out the nutrient loads for our plants when we harvest the mature fish,” he said. “That ensures we don’t have a crash in nutrients when we remove the large fish.”

Gaudet said that chefs like the smaller fish to grill and serve them whole. The popular Portland restaurant East Ender serves the fish in a crudo, while the ultra-local Portland Food Co-Op, a retail store that sells only Maine-made goods, offers the fish to shoppers in the downtown area.

Karl Deuben, co-owner of the East Ender, discovered the bass through the company’s produce offerings and hopes it becomes a staple on his menu once supplies become more stable.

“Wild striped bass has a muddy, dirty flavor. I never liked it,” said Deuben, who has bought fish for several of Portland’s finest restaurants, such as Hugo’s and Miyake. The farmed product from Fluid Farms met all his criteria for a whitefish – local, sustainable, high quality and delicious. “The fish is pristine, it’s a very healthy and well-cared for fish. It’s very hard to stand out in this market right now, but we have this fish and as our business grows we’ll have more varied applications for it.”

“They are such a pretty fish, it’s a very attractive presentation to customers,” said Gaudet, who worked as a fisheries biologist for the eight years until this April to put all his time and effort into the farm.

“I take a very ecological approach to aquaculture,” he explained. “I observe what works in nature and try to mimic that within our aquaponics system.”

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