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A wintry afternoon gives way to a brief rainbow over Willapa Bay. Oystering requires plenty of hard work and is dependent on fickle nature, which sometimes repays farmers on days like this.

With old ways and new ideas, Willapa Bay's oystermen face a shifting future

THIS IS THE WAY it has always been: Les and Dan Driscoll, father and son, 69 and 44, will pull on their rubber hip boots and set off into the nearly moonless night.

As Willapa Bay slowly shrinks with the tide, the two will begin the long hike away from the dinner lights shining on shore, through the crackling Spartina grass, over first spongy then muddy ground and, finally, into the black water itself. Thigh-deep, they will follow the receding tide out a mile or more to the small barge they'd left out when the waters were higher. They will reach it just as the mudflats surrounding them are fully exposed.

"It's not something very many people get to experience," Dan says. "To walk on the bottom of the sea."

Oysters are everywhere, a field of jagged speed bumps — so many that Les reminds everyone not to step on their fragile bills. Twice. The Driscolls sell their oysters live and in the shell. It's a picky market where only the best-lookers are bought, and each underfoot crunch is clearly driving him nuts.

The small team at Oysterville Sea Farms will have about three hours until the water chases them back to shore. Meantime, the bushel baskets come out as each man bends double and begins shoveling in oysters with two gloved hands, ignoring the bone-deep cold and leaky boots, shedding layers of clothing as they begin to sweat, hauling their brimming baskets out of the mud and onto the barge, trying to make as big a dent in their plot of ground as time will allow.

Very likely, this is the way it will always be.

Jorge Garcia and Enrique Ruiz sort oysters outside the Jolly Roger processing plant. A recent consumer shift toward live, in-shell oysters has left farmers struggling to accommodate the changing market.

For more than 150 years, sea farmers have been plucking oysters from Willapa Bay, now considered the largest farmed-shellfish producer in the U.S. But fickle nature and an even more fickle market are causing changes in the industry.

An oyster hotbed

In the 150 years that farmers like the Driscolls have been harvesting oysters from Willapa's waters, the way things are done has changed little. The best techniques are the old ones — a guy in the mud on one end, a guy with a shucking knife on the other — and no machine has been able to beat what one man can do by hand. The biggest industrial innovation, oystermen like to say, was the switch from sail to engine.

Still, some things are changing in this remote corner of Washington state. The oyster industry is in transition, and Willapa Bay farmers have experienced more change in the past few years than they've seen in decades.

"The industry is definitely in flux," says Jon Rowley, a shellfish marketing consultant. "I think there's a lot of excitement in the air when it comes to the oyster business."

From the handful of companies farming the bay more than a century ago to the estimated 350 independent growers in Willapa today, the bay has always been an essential contributor to the oyster industry. Though the shellfish are pulled from bays and inlets all the way from Alaska to the Baja Peninsula, Willapa is thought to be the largest farmed shellfish producer in the U.S., having provided, along with neighboring Grays Harbor, around 42 million pounds of oysters in 2003 at a value of $32 million, according to the Pacific Coast Shellfish Growers Association.

As they've always done, the farmers are tinkering with ways to stay on their feet while the industry landscape shifts — rolling with a changing market and dipping into other shellfish such as clams and geoducks to stay afloat. It's an oysterman's best defense against fickle nature and an even more fickle market.

While things settle, the Driscolls will be out in the mud like they always are, hard workers in hip boots, reaping their crop from the generous bay.

WHEN DAN DRISCOLL started Oysterville Sea Farms out of the cannery building he inherited from his dad in the early '90s, Willapa was still largely a meat market. The oysters were drawn from the bay, sent to a processing plant and shucked for their contents, where they would end up in a jar in a refrigerator somewhere.

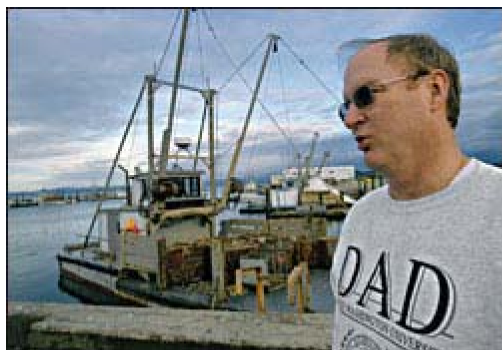
But shortly after he took over, things began to change, and in the past five years, the market has flipped. People don't want pre-shucked oysters anymore. They want them in their natural packaging, in the shell, live.

Some farmers think the reason is a generational thing: Today's home cooks don't really know what to do with a jar of oysters. Or it could be that we got fancy. Oyster bars came into vogue, and white-tablecloth restaurants started presenting them on a bed of ice and making them a luxury. More likely, it was the corresponding boom in the Asian market, which went looking to Washington for the large, fresh oysters that were so in demand.

Driscoll, however, was always in on the trend, mostly because that's how he likes them best. His business isn't big; selling much of his product retail out of his historic cannery in Oysterville, he's barely a pin prick on the industry map. Still, his preference gave him a head start on the changing market.

"I would like to see people appreciate oysters for what they are," he says.

It was different for Fritz and Ken Wiegardt.



Fritz Wiegardt is part of a long tradition of Willapa oystermen. His family has been farming these waters for 135 years, passing down their farm and processing plant from father to son.

Fourth- and fifth-generation Willapa oystermen, the two are the latest owners of the Jolly Roger processing plant and Wiegardt and Sons oyster farm, passed down from father to son for 135 years.

Used to be, the Wiegardts would produce about 90 percent shucked product to 10 percent shell. Now, it's about half and half.

Supermarket demand for shucked oysters is basically dying, says Ken Wiegardt, 31. "We're starting to see a shift toward restaurants."

For the Wiegardts, the switch has been a trial. It's more expensive and difficult to ship shell oysters, which are heavy, unwieldy and, if that weren't enough, alive. The Wiegardts can take up to four days to get the shucked product from bay to box. With whole oysters, it must be done in one.

Different market trends make things tricky, too: Americans want a small oyster, the Chinese want big.

"And what do you do with what's in between?" Wiegardt wonders. "There really isn't a market for it."