

# Tested by the pandemic, seafood businesses now poised to emerge stronger

By Judy Benson



Above, juvenile branzino swim in one of the tanks at Ideal Fish in Waterbury. Inset, Ideal Fish owner Eric Pedersen stands beside some of the tanks. Photo by Judy Benson.

COVID-19 made the going tough for many businesses. Those who grow, harvest and sell seafood in Connecticut were no exception.

They faced some unique and daunting challenges when the restaurants and wholesalers that made up more than 70 percent of their sales stopped buying their products.

“The pandemic was really a challenge, because it threw our market into total disarray,” said Eric Pedersen, owner of a five-year-old indoor aquaculture

operation in Waterbury called Ideal Fish. “Our main source of revenue went away overnight. We had to figure out how to do something different.”

As though inspired by the adage about how crisis makes the tough get going, Pedersen and others around the state who sell wild caught and farmed seafood reimaged their businesses, embraced new opportunities and started shaping a better future. With creativity, adaptability, perseverance and a little

help from Connecticut Sea Grant and the state Bureau of Aquaculture, they did much more than merely survive. They invented new ways to get their products to customers themselves when the middlemen they relied

on stopped buying, offering their wares fresh and in prepared dishes at farmers’ markets, breweries and in boxes delivered to front doors.

“Home delivery was really our only option,” said Allison Cole, co-owner with Andrew Maderia of the J & R Scallops retail shop in Stonington, an offshoot of the seafood supply business started by their fathers, John Castodio and Richie Maderia.

“It really was born out of the pandemic,” added Andrew Maderia.

Tessa Getchis, aquaculture extension specialist at Connecticut Sea Grant, said she is impressed with how these mostly small businesses responded to the moment with innovation and a willingness to try something new.

“They had to rewrite their business plans and change their whole business model overnight,” she said.

Sea Grant, working closely with the state Department of Agriculture Bureau of Agriculture, lent a hand, offering guidance on how to start direct sales markets, listing them



Sales clerk Nicole Dawson shows a 1-pound container of scallops to a customer at J & R Scallops in Stonington in April. Photo by Judy Benson

on a new seafood sales website and helping with applications for state and federal financial assistance. They also put together a project to keep shellfish workers, the largest group in the seafood sector, employed. The project was designed to yield long-term benefits to keep this valuable industry—worth \$30 million annually—viable.

“My wholesalers weren’t buying because the restaurants weren’t open,” recalled oyster farmer Kim Granbery, owner of Leets Island Oysters in Guilford. “Without the oyster buyback program, I would have had to chase down some other source of revenue.”

Most of the oysters harvested in Connecticut are sold fresh when they reach legal size of three inches. When they get much larger, there’s virtually no market, Granbery explained. He and other oystermen would have been stuck with a glut of oversized shellfish if the CT Sea Grant-Bureau of Aquaculture buyback project hadn’t come to the rescue.

“On June 24, 2020,” he recalled, “my wife, my friends and my dog all started working to harvest 3,000 of our large oysters. It was a real community effort. It took us a week, but we met the deadline.”

Said Gretchen, his wife: “We all pitched in. It was a lot of fun.”

Through the project, Granbery and other oyster farmers were paid for their oversized shellfish, which were then relocated to reseed state-owned natural shellfish beds. The large mature oysters were planted to replenish natural oyster populations, so the program had environmental as well as economic benefits.

Bureau of Aquaculture Director David Carey said the buyback program was part of a three-phase project to keep some cash flowing to shellfishermen while government relief funds were being processed.

“And we’re hopefully making an investment in the future,” he said.

More than 30 of the state’s 45 shellfish companies participated in at least one of the three components, he said. In addition to the buyback, shellfish workers were also able to harvest clams from state-owned beds they could then sell and help rejuvenate the beds for new growth in the process.

In another phase of the project, oystermen including Jonathan Waters were hired to restore 800 acres of the natural shellfish beds that are the main source of oyster seed for farmers. Using tined scoops called seed oyster dredges extended from boats, the bottom is combed to raise shell buried under accumulated silt. This gives oyster larvae places to set and grow, restoring productivity to these areas.

“We’ve been wanting to do rehabilitation work on these beds for some time, but hadn’t been able to do it,” Carey said. The pandemic created the right set of

circumstances—an available workforce and the emergency response funds to pay them.

Waters has been oystering in the Thimble Islands section of Branford since 1985. Now 70, he said his business was transitioning to growing oysters in cages instead of harvesting them off the bottom, and bringing his 33-year-old daughter Emily Waters Harris into the operation. When the pandemic happened, it turned out to be good timing for him to employ the 30-foot vessel he built himself, the F/V Merlin, toward turning the bottom of the oyster grounds like a farmer tills a field before planting.

“The activity was welcome,” he said. “It was constructive. I’m really into the preservation and continuation of this business.”

On a foggy morning late last March, Waters steered Merlin away from the dock to the waters around the Thimble Islands, with Emily Waters Harris maneuvering the oyster dredge.



“It really needs to be worked more,” he said about the oyster bed as his daughter lowered the dredge. “Hopefully, this (rehabilitation work) will help supply small oysters down the road for other people to grow out.”

Carey of the Bureau of Aquaculture is also looking toward the future.

“Through this restoration plan, I’m hoping we can come up with a new management strategy,” he said. “I’d like to be continuing what we did.”



While Granbery and Waters stayed focused on doing their part to keep the state’s shellfish industry moving forward despite the pandemic, those with other types of seafood businesses pursued different paths to get through the crisis.

J & R Scallops had been relying almost exclusively on wholesale customers, despite Cole and

Above, Guilford oyster farmer Kim Granbery shows some of the oysters just harvested from Hoadley Creek near his home on a day in early March. Photos: Judy Benson

*continued on page 10* ►



Above, oyster farmer Kim Granbery and a crew of family and friends harvest oversized oysters from his beds in Guilford in June. The oysters were sold to the state and relocated as part of a program to reseed natural oyster beds. Photos: Bill Sauerbrey



Andrew Maderia urging their fathers to diversify.

“We’d been hounding them about getting a website started,” the younger Maderia said.

Both he and Cole began applying their marketing skills to build a social media presence, and started offering home delivery of fresh local lobsters, scallops, haddock, salmon and other seafood from the new website, much of it caught by New England fishermen. Vans once used for wholesale deliveries were redirected for weekly runs in a 30-mile radius around Stonington, from East Lyme to Charlestown, R.I.

“We’re doing about 40 to 100 delivery customers a month,” Cole said. “We ran a good social media plan, and it caught on.”

As customer demand grew, they decided to open a store in a former velvet mill in Stonington repurposed for small retail outlets, a brewery and other boutique businesses. It’s open Thursday through Sunday.

“Everything in the shop is offered online, but people wanted to be able to go to the store and pick up their fish,” Cole said. “All aspects of our business are now firing on all cylinders at this point. We’re going to keep all of this going after the pandemic.”

At Ideal Fish, the Internet also provided the means to keep the unique young business afloat. The company raises branzino, or European sea bass, in indoor tanks in a former button factory, and had been selling virtually all of its fish to restaurant and wholesale customers before the pandemic lockdowns began. When those sales suddenly plunged, Pedersen decided to harvest, process and freeze all his full-grown fish, and take a pause on starting a new crop to make improvements to his plant to allow future expansion.

In the meantime, online sales with home deliveries began, with customers able to order whole or filleted frozen branzino, which Pedersen described as a “mild, buttery, flakey fish.” Offerings were expanded with salmon, rainbow trout, barramundi, several types of smoked fish and other types of seafood raised by other aquaculture producers. Word spread about the business through the Ideal Fish Facebook and Instagram pages, and through the company’s regular presence at several farmers markets in Fairfield County. Pedersen is looking to add a farmers market in Manhattan this summer.

“We launched an Internet e-commerce distribution channel,” said Pedersen. “All the other companies whose products we sell adhere to our high standards for sustainability. The packages are shipped via FedEx the next day. We’re really pleased with it. We’ve got about 2,000 pounds going out in a national distribution range, and traffic to our site is increasing every week.”

Left, Emily Waters Harris empties shellfish and seaweed from the oyster dredge while the F/V Merlin plies the waters around the Thimble Islands in Branford. Center, Jonathan Waters steers the vessel on a foggy March morning. Photos: Judy Benson

*continued on page 12* ▶

In late April, a few of the company's 2,500-gallon tanks were again full of young branzino swimming in endless circles through the brackish water. A new batch of fingerlings was on its way from a hatchery in France.

"In three to four months we expect to be back online and harvesting our fish," Pedersen said.

Seafood wholesalers found new ways to keep their businesses going, too. Chad Simoneaux, co-owner with his wife Camille of Gulf Shrimp Co. in Plantsville, shifted more of their products from the wholesale to the retail side of their business when the pandemic hit. They added curbside and home delivery services. But while wholesale orders from restaurants declined, other wholesale customers increased.

"Our grocery stores and fish market orders grew," he said, "because people still needed to eat. We had our best year ever."

Simoneaux said he and his wife decided at the beginning of the pandemic they were going to stay open no matter what.

"We just said, 'we've got to make it work,'" he said. "We're not just going to let 30 years in business go because something happens."

As the pandemic lifts, neither Gulf Shrimp, Ideal Fish, J & R Scallops, nor the oystermen expect a return to the way their businesses used to run. Carey, of the Bureau of Aquaculture, believes this could be a transformative time for the state's seafood growers and purveyors, when selling direct to customers started to become the rule rather than the exception, and new appreciation for the state's seafood resources brings sustained investment.

Getchis said that CT Sea Grant and the Bureau of Aquaculture have been advocating for direct seafood sales for years but that many businesses owners didn't have much interest at the time.

"When you can sell everything you harvest or grow to a middleman, it doesn't make financial sense to divert the time and effort to direct sales," she said. "But consumer demand has been growing and more people are asking for fresh local seafood. If one good thing came out of the pandemic, it's forced people to consider other business models and they're being met with success."

Getchis herself is a regular customer of the fresh salmon from J & R Scallops and oysters from the local farmers market. "I'm not just an advocate—I'm a customer," she said.

*For information about Ideal Fish, Gulf Shrimp and other companies offering direct seafood sales, visit: <https://shellfish.uconn.edu/seafood-sales/> For information about J & R Scallops, visit: [www.jrscallops.com](http://www.jrscallops.com)*