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[« December 2011 Table of Contents](#)

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Special Feature: Mussels

Industry sees room for growth as it rebounds from recession

By **Melissa Wood**
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The key to selecting a good mussel is to ask, did it have a good life?

"When they're stressed they grow a thicker shell for protection," explains Matt Moretti, owner of Wild Ocean Aquaculture in Portland, Maine. Those reared in ideal conditions can concentrate their energy on growing more meat inside their shells.

As a shellfish farmer, Moretti's primary job is to create a stress-free habitat for the blue mussels that he grows in Portland's Casco Bay. Wild mussels are collected from the bay as juveniles then attached to ropes in sock-like netting that biodegrades by the time the mussels are old enough to get their footing. For 18 months, they are left to grow on ropes suspended into the water from 40-by-40-foot rafts. The only thing he adds are nets around the

rafts to keep out the ever-hungry eider ducks that would easily strip an entire raft — two and a half miles of mussels — if they could get through.

Moretti says raft cultivation keeps the bivalves in the water column, and not on the sea floor or in the air. "They are in their optimal growth environment for their entire life, until they're harvested," he explains. "The whole process is elegant in its simplicity. We provide the ultimate habitat and protect them from predators."

The growth of the mussel market was less than optimal in recent years. Though prices for farmed blue mussels have remained consistently low, hovering around \$1.30 a pound for the past five years (give or take a nickel), mussel sales took a hit when the recession peaked. After steady growth, imports of farmed blue mussels from Canada, the largest supplier of mussels to the United States, dropped about half a million pounds from 2007 to 2008 to around 21.2 million pounds.

But after a couple lean years, the mussel industry is growing again. In 2010, mussel imports from Canada reached almost 28 million pounds. The industry hopes promotional efforts will further that growth.

"The mussel industry has never before marketed the product and about three and a half years ago the processors got together and said, 'We need to actively promote our product,'" says Linda Duncan, executive director of the Mussel Industry Council of North America in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island.

The council, made up of Canadian mussel suppliers, first looked at consumption in a 2008 survey of 10 cities in Canada and the United States. They found that 70 percent of mussels are eaten in restaurants and that the average consumer only eats mussels three times a year, if they ate mussels at all.

"It was discovered through research that consumers really did not know how to cook and prepare the product at home," explains Duncan.

To bridge that gap the council reaches out to consumers through its Facebook page and website, [discovermussels.com](#), which feature cooking tips and recipes timed to make mussels a part of holiday celebrations. A Valentine's Day contest promoted "the romantic side of mussels," offering consumers a chance to win a trip for two to Paris. (According to the contest press release, "American and Italian researchers claim that mussels contain compounds that prompt the body to release hormones connected with physical attraction. Mussels are rich in zinc, a mineral known to keep feelings of love alive.")

On the industry side, the council produces a newsletter and videos for chefs. It has hosted workshops at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Miami and has more culinary school workshops scheduled in the Midwest for this winter.

"You can't do just one thing," says Duncan. "We're very focused on getting people to start thinking about mussels as a healthy seafood choice."

Duncan points out that mussels also earn high marks for sustainability. The Seafood Watch program at the [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#) in Monterey, Calif., calls farmed mussels a "best choice" for environmentally sound farming methods.

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In Canada, 80 percent of mussels are harvested from tiny Prince Edward Island, where 130 mussel growers farm 11,000 surface acres of rope-cultured blue mussels. Farmers have two years of crop in the water at all times, grown from seeds collected from local waters. Duncan says mussels typically take 18 months to grow to market size, but that time frame can range from 12 to 24 months in other places, depending on water temperature, phytoplankton varieties and water density.

Newfoundland and Labrador's mussel industry consists of 25 companies operating at 59 sites, according to the Minister of Fisheries and Aquaculture, the Hon. Darin King. Before the recession, the province's mussel industry had been growing, experiencing its highest production year in history in 2007, reaching almost 7.5 million pounds. After a fall-off in 2008 and 2009, King says production grew again to almost 5.5 million pounds in 2010.

"We've experienced, like many parts of the world, some downturn with the recession," says King, "but the last two years are showing we're rebounding and we're optimistic by 2013 we're going to see an increase in our production level."

The provincial government has been focusing on exploring new markets, particularly in Europe and Asia, by participating in industry trade shows and sending a delegation to China. Companies are also emphasizing value-added products: 15 percent of the province's mussels are sold frozen, usually in 1-pound bags that can be boiled or microwaved.

"We're very pleased with the mussel industry, and very hopeful it will continue to grow and flourish," says King.

Down the coast and across the border, the mussel industry is growing as well, according to Sebastian Belle, executive director of the [Maine Aquaculture Association](#) in Hallowell, Maine.

"We in Maine simply can't grow enough to meet that demand," says Belle. "Our mussel growers are paid more than anybody else in the marketplace. They have a very long shelf life, because they're so fresh. As a result of that, the mussel-farming sector in Maine is growing pretty steadily."

Belle says Great Eastern Mussel Farms dominated Maine's farmed mussel industry for 30 years by, but the company fell on hard times and dissolved in 2008. "Now we've been building back up out of that slump," says Belle. "The interesting thing is that out of the ashes of Great Eastern arose a whole series of new companies. Some of them are raft companies, some of them are bottom culture companies. We have a whole new group of entrepreneurs who have come into the mussel industry."

Most of Maine's blue mussels are harvested from wild mussel beds, from which they are either raked up by hand or dragged up by boats. Within the last five years, total landings peaked at 18.8 million pounds valued at \$2.7 million in 2006 but dropped down to 13 million pounds worth \$1.6 million in 2008, according to the Maine Department of Marine Resources.

In 2010, landings came in at 14.6 million pounds worth \$2 million. Of that, Maine's dozen farms (some with multiple sites) produced around 2 million pounds in 2010, according to an informal survey of association members. The biggest challenge to the farmed mussel industry's continued growth is gaining access to new lease sites. Maine is a popular destination for retirees who want to live on the coast but don't want the noise, smell and activity that go with a working waterfront. When sites are approved, however, Belle says they eventually are embraced.

"I think this is one of the most fascinating things. If a lease site gets approved and gets put in, even the most contentious operations end up becoming the neighborhood farm," says Belle. "Over time it becomes part of their local landscape."

Belle says the primary destinations for Maine mussels are high-end seafood restaurants within a day's truckload from Maine, which brings them as far south as Atlanta and westward to Chicago.

"Chefs absolutely love a Maine farmed mussel. They find it's a product they can count on," says Belle.

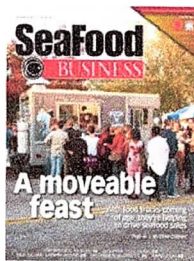
As one of those Maine farmers, Wild Ocean's Moretti has to ensure fresh product makes it to market as fast as possible. A barge with hydraulic processing equipment can be towed to both farm sites near Clapboard and Bangs Islands in Casco Bay (the mussels appear on menus as Bangs Island Mussels). As a winch hauls up the mussels, a pipe around the rope separates the mussels out into a large pile on the barge platform. Next, the mussels go into a de-clumper and grader machine that separates the mussels and sorts them by size. They're polished up in the de-bysser, which cleans the mussels and trims their byssal threads, or beards. Moretti says that each one is then inspected by hand before they are packed in ice, loaded onto a skiff and brought to Portland.

Moretti, who co-owns Wild Ocean with his father, Gary Moretti, plans to increase automation and move processing operations to a 63-foot steel-hulled boat that can go out in any weather, expediting the time they go from the water to the refrigerator or ice, and making them as fresh as possible for their arrival on restaurant tables.

"The local character of the water plays a part in the taste and quality of mussels. Our waters are warm enough where they can grow quickly, but cold enough to discourage disease," says Moretti. "We can sell as many as we can grow."

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