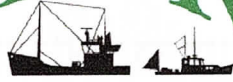


THE WORKING

WATERFRONT



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Article

Family Runs Sustainability-Minded Mussel Farm

by Muriel L. Hendrix



Matt Moretti works aboard the Bangs Island Mussel processing barge. Photo: Leah Arsenault

From an early age, Matt Moretti was intrigued by the natural world, particularly the marine environment. When he and his father, Gary, went out lobstering together, his father says nine-year old Matt would spend more time with a magnifying glass peering at creatures that clung to or crawled into the traps than he

would helping out. Matt's fascination with the marine environment came from his father, who grew up "trot line" fishing for channel catfish in the Mississippi River with his grandfather, setting him on a lifetime course of activity on the water. "Water has always been a part of my life," he says.

The Morettis' respect for sustainable marine enterprises inspired them to form Wild Ocean Aquaculture, LLC., and purchase Bangs Island Mussels from Tollef Olsen and Paul Dobbins, who had run the aquafarm for 10 years. Gary and Matt were attracted to blue mussel (*Mytilus edulis*) aquaculture, Gary says, because "Sustainably, it is the perfect use. Nothing is added; you use the best husbandry possible for growing a high quality product." The Morettis grow their mussels by planting wild-caught mussel seed on

biodegradable socking material that is suspended on ropes hanging from rafts. The mussels feed on microscopic plants in the water.

Matt, who is 27, brought extensive experience to the venture with a BA in biology from Bates College and a masters in marine biology from Northeastern University in Boston, where he participated in the Three Seas Program, working at research stations in Massachusetts, Polynesia and California. He also has worked at New England Aquarium raising baby lobsters, in herring research at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland, and on an oyster farm on the Damariscotta River.

Gary, a nurse anesthetist and partner in Nurse Anesthesia of Maine in Bangor, had been introduced to mussel culture in the mid-90s. His neighbor Mike Hastings, then director of Maine Aquaculture Innovation Center, asked if he would be interested in joining the Mussel Working Group, which he had formed to help stimulate interest in growing mussels in Maine waters. "It was probably one of the most exciting aspects of ocean anything I've ever come across," Gary says. He learned about all stages of mussel culture and the most advanced techniques available at the time. From then on, he says, "I felt it was always a consideration to do this at some point in my life when the opportunity came up."

When Matt saw in a newspaper that Bangs Island Mussels was for sale, he and Gary had to check it out. The sale included 160 hours of training and help from Olsen, plus a 41-foot processing barge with stainless steel processing equipment, a boat, three 40-by-40-foot working growout rafts with predator nets (to keep out eider ducks, which can clean out a raft's mussels overnight) and transfer of a 1.66 acre lease near Clapboard Island with provision to grow mussels and various seaweeds and to add a fourth raft to the site.

The Morettis are working to increase the sustainability and efficiency of their operation. They have purchased and refitted a 53-foot steel-hull fishing fleet trawler to hold processing equipment. Its diesel engine will run on biodiesel fuel most of the year rather than gasoline, which fuels the barge and boats that came with the business. For the boat's bottom, Matt used environmentally friendly ePaint, an anti-fouling paint that does not contain the copper commonly used in bottom paints.

Gary says that although rewarding, the reality is that raising mussels is very expensive and complex. "The capital expense is great," he says, "lease, maintain rafts, nets, processing equipment, boats." He notes that Maine leases are for only 10 years as opposed to lease agreements on Prince Edward Island, where they are granted for 50 years, making it easier for growers to obtain larger bank loans. Then too, he says, "there are the problems like growth to market size takes up to 18 months, and threats of predation, losing mussels in rough weather, red tide closures, pollution closures."

Still, despite difficulties, he says, "growing mussels is immensely doable and no more complex than anything else on the water. The whole thing for us is to come up with a growth scale that gives us predictable high-quality products available all the time."

To increase productivity, they have taken over a second lease site at Bangs Island, added two rafts there and a fourth at the original site, a 100 percent expansion in just one year. "It made sense to move so quickly," Matt says, "because despite the general downturn in the economy, there has not been any drop in the demand for mussels. We can sell as many as we can grow." (Maine Department of Marine Resources figures for mussels harvested from aquafarms show totals of almost 600,000 pounds in 2008 increasing to 1,400,000 pounds in 2010.) He adds that the reputation for quality product that Olsen and Dobbins built up during the 10 years they owned the farm has been a great advantage. He uses their wholesalers and has added another. In addition to being featured by name in local fine restaurants, Bangs

Island Mussels are sold nationally, as far as San Francisco.

In the future, Gary and Matt would like to develop an educational outreach program using their new boat to take students out to the rafts. “It’s important for people to have this first hand experience,” Gary says, “to see what we’re doing here in their state.”

Ultimately, he adds, Wild Ocean Aquaculture hopes to utilize multiple aquaculture techniques at their sites to develop other high-quality sustainable products like seaweed, scallops or oysters. “We want to focus on what grows naturally, and determine what we can do to foster that growth in an aquaculture setting,” he says. To him, finding economically viable ways to keep people working on the water is an important aspect of preserving Maine’s working waterfront. “I want to see kids not lose that option,” he says.

Muriel Hendrix is a freelance writer living in Bath.