



NARRATIVE

murder point oysters

How one Alabama family is creating the “perfect” oyster.

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THE ZIRLOTT FAMILY, PROPRIETORS OF ALABAMA’S Murder Point Oysters, didn’t set out to be oystermen. They have, in fact, been shrimpers for five generations (though Brent Zirlott’s great-grandfather’s oyster license from 1892 is still in their possession—further proving that the sea, in one form or another, has been in their blood for years). “We’ve made our whole living out of the sea,” says Rosa Zirlott, matriarch of the clan.

The family’s transition from commercial shrimping to boutique oystering came via a program launched by Dr. Bill Walton at Alabama’s Auburn University. Brent and Rosa, along with their son, Lane, are part of a handful of Alabama aquaculturists changing the way the world thinks about southern oysters.

Walton arrived to Auburn’s Shellfish Lab at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab after spending time studying oyster farming techniques in New England. At Auburn, he used that knowledge to develop a curriculum that teaches a new form of oystering, and in turn revives local economies, restores habitat, and improves water quality in the Gulf. He launched the program in 2009, and the Zirlotts jumped on board.

Alabama’s coast naturally offers near-perfect conditions for raising oysters. The state is home to wild oysters, though the typical Alabama oyster isn’t the higher-quality kind eaten on the half shell—it’s deep-fried and served at a seafood shack. Walton wanted to change that, and to revive an economy that had been hard-hit with disasters from hurricanes to oil spills, by creating an industry of “branded” oysters, to be served with mignonette sauce in high-end restaurants.



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Previous attempts at oyster farming had been unsuccessful in part because farmers weren't able to get a viable price for their efforts. But by the time Walton arrived, the market was ready and willing to pay top dollar for boutique oysters. Walton's Oyster Farming Fundamentals class at Auburn teaches would-be oystermen the realities of oyster farming, and gives them access to 20,000 oysters, equipment, and space to launch their farm. The Zirlotts were part of that very first group.

In the wild, oysters attach themselves to something on the seafloor and grow into oblong, inconsistent shapes. Their shells are covered in algae and barnacles, they eat whatever microscopic plants float by, and they are vulnerable to hurricanes and predators. Farmed oysters are protected from predators and burial, and regular handling results in speedier growth, higher survival rates, and consistently good flavor and aesthetically pleasing shells. "It's the opposite of what people think of when they think of a southern oyster," says Lane Zirlott.

The Australian longline is one of Walton's newly implemented methods. It employs a series of evenly spaced poles (essentially PVC pipes) driven into the ocean floor, with hooks placed along the length. Lines or cables are strung between the poles to create a long line strung with baskets. At Murder Point, the oysters live in groups of around seventy per basket, in four to twelve feet of water. At this depth, the Zirlotts can lift and hang the oysters according to where they are in their stage of development.

Each brand of oyster also has its own procedure for teasing out desired characteristics. They might be lowered to adjust for appropriate water temperature, or set at a level where they have access to more plankton for feeding, or raised completely out of the water to dry for a day, the sunlight killing any algae or biofoul on the shell. All of these routines affect the taste of the oyster in the end. Murder Points are noted as being full, rich, and buttery with a slightly saline finish.

Murder Point oysters are sorted frequently for size, and put in baskets according to their correct stage of growth. Every week they're run through a tumbler—a rotating metal drum that stresses

the oyster as it tries to keep its shell closed, resulting in a deep cup instead of a long, flat shape. The Zirlott's oysters are two to three-inches long with the characteristic deep cup. "We can actually take this oyster and have a lot to do with its environment and create it to look a certain way," says Rosa.

Now in their third year, Murder Point tends two farms, one in Porterville Bay and the other, which is almost twice as big, in Grand Bay. The Porterville Bay farm has 5,200 baskets, but the Grand Bay farm is expected to produce one million oysters in 2017, making Murder Point one of the biggest producers in the state.

Oyster farming doesn't come along with the same negative tags as, say, tilapia farming or shrimp farming in Thailand—this style of aquaculture is sustainable, creates jobs, is easy on the environment, preserves a traditional way of life, and is bringing a new and delicious product onto the oyster market. The oyster shells are returned to the ocean floor, where they're creating a natural reef. Someday, the spat (oyster larvae) will be put into the ocean and attach to it, creating a "wild" oyster farm. Says Rosa, "I know there's a lot of perception that maybe people are taking advantage of the sea and they're not putting back. But any real commercial fisherman understands you gotta have something for tomorrow."

For the Zirlotts, oyster farming really is a labor of love, and it takes a certain type of person who will invest in the lifestyle. The Zirlotts are, by nature, perfectionists in the sense that they believe they'll get out what they put in. "That's where the love comes in," says Rosa. "You have to persuade this hard oyster to change into something beautiful and unique."

As for the unusual name? What's known today as Murder Point (an actual landmark near the farm site) used to be called Myrtle Point. In 1927, a dispute over oyster leases came up between two rival oystermen, when they both claimed rights the same bottom area. When one shot and killed the other, the area became known as Murder Point. The Zirlotts poke fun with their catch phrase, "Oysters worth killing for." As son Lane adds, "Once you have one, you'll know why we say that."