



Farming the Ocean

Perry Raso

Rhode Island

When Perry Raso was a boy, his father often spoke about his dream of being a fisherman. After he retired from the police force, he moved his family from the suburbs of New York City to Rhode Island so he could pursue that dream. It was an ambitious dream for someone who'd never worked in that field. Unfortunately, he soon realized that becoming successful fisherman in retirement was pretty tough. After many struggles and failures, he decided it'd be wiser to continue the life he knew, in police work. But that wasn't the end of the story...

In time, the Rasos would achieve this dream through Perry, who from an early age grew up clamming in the pristine waters of Point Judith Pond. "In many ways, my dad's vision inspired me," he says. "Luckily, I was able to pick up the dream where he left off."

Perry started out by digging shellfish when he was about 12 years old, with a commercial fisherman he knew. "I still remember the first time I went out digging for clams," he says. "When I pulled my rake out of the water, I couldn't believe it. I was thinking, that's 7 or 8 bucks worth of clams! I knew that the harder I pulled on the rake and the longer I did it, the more money I'd make. I liked being able to determine how much I made by how hard I worked."

And he would be working hard. Clamming is an extremely physically demanding job; clammers work in all seasons, including wading in icy New England waters in the middle of winter. It's not for the faint of heart.

When he first started clamming, the specialized rake Perry used to dredge the pond with must have been taller than he was. At his TedX talk, he brought one of the rakes onto the stage and showed the audience how you drag the rake through the mud to catch clams. "There I was, just a kid, standing in chest-deep water, pulling on the handle," he explained. "Every few minutes I'd pull the rake up, and shake the sediment out." And he'd repeat this action, over and over again throughout the day, rain or shine. But, as tough as the work was, it gave him the background he needed for commercial fishing.

Perry was off to a promising start. Still, he knew he needed a proper education if he was going to become the successful businessman, he knew he could be. So, he studied aquaculture and fisheries technology at the University of Rhode Island. Upon graduation in 2002, with the help of a Reed Aquaculture initiative grant, he had the tools and experience he needed to start his first sustainable venture - the one-acre Matunuck Oyster Farm. It was an instant success.

"When I first started selling oysters at local farmer's markets, the reaction was fantastic," he says. "I didn't expect everyone to say that the oysters I was offering tasted better than what they were used to. It made me feel great. But more importantly, I realized that there was a tremendous untapped market for local, sustainable seafood. Far bigger than my small operation was capable of supporting."

Before long, he was farming two acres to fill the gap. Then three acres; then seven. Locally, his organic product was such a hit that he eventually expanded his operations nationally. In fact, he was expanding so fast that he bought the only commercial property available in East Matunuck on the pond—which was a rundown clam shack.

"When I started the Matunuck Oyster Bar 10 years ago, I didn't expect much from it," he says. "I bought the place because I needed the dock. But to my surprise, it worked really well as an oyster bar. And then I saw an opportunity to

make my restaurant even more sustainable. So, I started organic vegetable farming to supplement the oysters. Before I knew it, I had a shellfish hatchery across the street. And at long last, I had a setup that was entirely sustainable.”

A pioneer, Perry has become a legend—in the world of sustainable aquaculture. His combined farm-to-table/ pond-to-table approach is a model of success. And this sort of diversity in food production is critical. It is a hedge against economic uncertainty. It’s an alternative approach that can help save struggling farmers. And the data says the opportunity is there for entrepreneurs who want to make a mark.

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the United States is the leading importer of fish and fishery products in the world: 90 percent of the seafood consumed in the U.S. comes from abroad – and more than half of that is sourced from aquaculture. What this amounts to is a \$14 billion seafood trade deficit that can be addressed on the home front of New England’s pristine waters.

However, the specter of climate change is raising concerns. Many of the shellfish raised – like mussels, oysters, and clams—are especially vulnerable to extreme weather conditions. “If the waters increase in temperature, the growing season increases,” Perry explains. “That means the amount of time the oysters can be stressed increases, since most of the stress occurs during the summer. So more extreme weather increases the occurrences of the conditions that can lead to disease and ultimately, mortality. There are benefits to being a little inland on a pond, as opposed to on the coast. It’s protected. But climate change poses great risks no matter where you are.”

With his \$200,000 a year business, Perry employs more than 200 people at his very popular restaurant, many of whom started out as shuckers. But he is much more than just an entrepreneur. On summer mornings, he takes local youth out on his boat so they can observe firsthand the life of an oysterman. In the fall, he serves as a mentor for the Coastal Fellows program at the University of Rhode Island. And for the last 11 years, every spring his oyster bar has held an annual Earth Day beach cleanup at East Matunuck State Beach.

“Since before the restaurant started, we’ve been taking volunteers to the beach, the salt marshes, and Succotash Salt Pond,” he says. “We pick up all the trash lined up on our shore. The amount of debris we’ve cleaned up is just been amazing. Over the years, it’s really added up. It’s become a community staple. It’s something we will always do.”

Perry believes it’s very important for young people with an interest in sustainability to get involved any way they can. “If you want to know how something works, ask questions,” he says. “Track down people who are doing what you want to do and learn from them. Find a farm, and work or volunteer with them. Attend trade shows. Read up on things. And look for funded opportunities. There are always grants and internships, as a way in for young entrepreneurs. Aquaculture is not an easy field; it’s farming. But it’s very rewarding.”

In regard to his own personal journey, Perry credits the many mentors who guided him toward being a leader in sustainable aquaculture. “At every stage, I myself asked a lot of questions,” he says. “I went to a lot of conferences. I studied under and collaborated with a lot of great professors at the University of Rhode Island. Dr. Michael Rice. Dr. Dave Bengston. And of course, Dr. Marta Gomez-Chiarri, with whom I still work today. They’ve all done so much for me – but I was willing to humble myself and put in the work to learn. You can’t have one without the other and expect to be an overnight success.”

That said, Perry feels that it’s important for people to become as familiar with aquaculture as they are with other type of farms. “We need to make more people aware that aquaculture is a good use of our water bodies. It’s also a great use of the public trust. Our water bodies are owned by all Rhode Islanders. As of now, I think it’s viewed as more of a niche industry. But I want to change this. Aquaculture should be viewed in the same way as sustainable agriculture. Then we can really make an impact.”

If there’s anybody capable of bringing aquaculture into the mainstream, surely, it’s Perry. It’s a big ask. But there’s no reason to think he’s done innovating yet. He’s already done a great deal for the sustainability movement, and given back to his community more than he could possibly know.

That includes his father, who in Perry has surely seen his dream come true. And there’s no telling what great dreams and people he will continue to inspire.

No Fishermen, no fish.

Lailah Gifty Akita

Call to Action: Visit Perry at the Matunuck Oyster Bar: <https://www.rhodyoysters.com>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute

www.stonesoupleadership.org

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