

Adding Value to Oyster Crops – Branding, Marketing, and Production Strategies

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What is Oyster Branding?

Creating a unique brand for oysters is a great way to maximize both profit and market exposure in the rapidly growing field of gourmet oysters. To capitalize on the particular techniques an oyster company uses to culture and harvest oysters, producers can choose to create a brand. Upscale restaurants, seafood fests, and raw bars all cater to the palate of oyster connoisseurs by showcasing multiple brands all claiming a distinct flavor. Gone are the days when “a dozen raw oysters”

were on the menu; people can now order their favorites by name. To reach this niche mar-

ket, small oyster aquaculture operations have started creating unique brands of oysters. Whether capitalizing on techniques al-

ready used to manipulate the reproduction, taste, or texture of the oyster produced, oyster



branding is an effective way to increase demand. Small scale hatcheries and oystermen can now cater to large scale audiences without increasing cost. Uniquely branding oysters and catering to luxury food connoisseurs is a great profit maximizer.

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wide.

What is Branding?

A brand is a name, image, or symbol of a product placed upon a product by a business.

The brand represents a promise from the manufacturer (or in this case, the aquaculturist) that the oysters are unique and different from others and meet the producer's high standards. The simple promise of a "new" or "different" oyster appeals to the psychological aspect of marketing and advertising. The collecting or sampling of distinct brands of oysters appeals to "foodies" and oyster consumers across the globe.

There are three key steps to creating a unique brand. First, the oyster producer must ensure the brand meets the needs of a customer; in this case, oyster enthusiasts who want to experience different flavors or textures. Second, firmly establish the brand by marketing it and market what makes the producer's oysters stand apart from other oysters. Finally, elicit favorable responses to the brand, such as obtaining favorable critical reviews, obtaining recognition from industry organizations, winning awards at seafood shows, or simply creating a local allegiance among restaurant goers.

Positive responses to, and

recognition of an oyster brand leads to increased sales and profits. The ultimate goal of branding is to create brand loyalty. Producers want people asking for



Branding brings a competitive edge to the table!

their oysters by name.

Choosing a species of Oyster:

When choosing to brand oysters, there are several key variables that need to be analyzed. The first choice producers make is which species of oyster to produce. Edible oysters are comprised of two genera: *Crassostrea* and *Oistre*. There are dozens of species worldwide, but primarily harvested in the US are the Virginia (often called the eastern), the Kumamoto, and the Pacific oysters. Less common are the Belon and the Olympia oysters. Flavor and texture varies widely among these species, from briny or salty to buttery or creamy.

Eastern Oyster

Many qualities of eastern oysters make them brand-able and mar-

ketable. First and foremost, their taste can be altered depending on how and where they are cultured. Eastern oysters are often classified as having varying degrees of briny flavor, with a savory, crisp finish. Eastern oysters are the primary species of oyster cultured in the U.S.

Kumamoto

Originating from only one bay in Japan, these oysters are frequently cultivated in the U.S. – primarily on the west coast.

They are slow growing,

giving the producer ample opportunities to manipulate the flavor and texture. They have a small shell size, a deep cup, and what has been referred to as a "cucumber-melon" flavor.

Pacific

The Pacific oyster, often called the Japanese oyster, is the most commonly cultured oyster in the world. It is very hardy and can be grown in almost all aquatic environments at a very fast pace. The degree of brininess changes depending on location, but the flavor tends to be herbaceous with a creamy texture.

Characteristics to Manipulate:

In the hatchery or ocean setting, there are many characteristics that can be manipulated to make a brand of oyster distinct. The

following sections detail several aspects of oyster growth a producer may choose to alter or incorporate into the oyster maturation and harvest process.

Salinity

Oyster connoisseurs consider salinity the most obvious taste characteristic. Oysters grown in or near the open ocean often have the briniest of flavors, while those grown in intensive inland facilities have a fresher, crisper flavor. Oysters grown in rainy areas or with a freshwater inflow have a less saline taste. As always, water quality should be closely monitored and altered to fit the specific needs of the brand. Oysters can be flushed with freshwater, or a briny, high salinity mix to give a range of delicate salt flavors which can attract even the most selective palate.

A fresh or salt water flush occurs after harvesting, and can be as long as the producer chooses, provided it does not cause damage to the oysters.

Temperature

Temperature can also be manipulated to change taste and texture. Oysters raised at cooler temperatures are generally saltier, with crisper flavor and tend to be more firm than those raised in warm water.

Nutrients

Nutrients in the oyster's environment can accentuate an oyster's flavor. Nutrient levels in the water source should be closely monitored throughout growout and harvesting process. High levels of nutrients in the water, can result in more flavorful and robust oysters.

Pressure

High pressure processing represents a relatively new and innovative way of culturing oysters. It entails immersing oysters in water and subjecting them to extremely high pressures. This pressure destroys natural pathogens without changing taste or texture. The process also shucks the oyster from the shell and leaves the consumer without the hassle of shucking.



The specific style in which a producer markets his oysters can lead to a potential niche market.

Harvest and Growout

In a rack or bag suspension system, water runoff can be blocked, resulting in a growth of algae the oysters will consume. This system creates a tangible taste difference compared to systems

which allow runoff to flow freely.

Another alteration could be the size of the oysters that a producer sells; small, palm size oysters are often desirable when serving oysters raw, while large meaty oysters are favorable for cooked dishes. The size of an oyster can be manipulated by timing the harvest or grading the oysters. Oysters are often shaken or tumbled, altering the size and shape of the shell. The process of tumbling reduces the sharp outer lip, resulting in a deeper grooved bottom.

Any factor that can be altered in the hatchery or at harvest can be the key to an oyster brand. Some predominant harvest factors include the harvest season and temperature, the size and age at harvest, and how the producer markets the oysters.

Breeding

Two great methods of creating a unique brand of oysters is to buy well known seed stock and crossbreed them to introduce new characteristics. These small, simple steps

taken in the hatchery may result in a dedicated following for the taste and texture of a new brand of oysters.

Marketing

Many people enjoy oysters raw

on the half shell or cooked in a variety of ways. The specific style in which a producer markets his oysters can lead to a potential niche market.

Oysters can be sold shucked in gallon containers, suitable for restaurants that fry or bake their oysters. Oysters may also be sold frozen and breaded for consumers to cook in their homes.

In many cases, oysters with distinct tastes and textures can be served raw. A diverse assortment of restaurants and markets cater to consumers willing to try different brands of oysters.

When catering to raw oyster enthusiasts, always leave palm-sized oysters in their shell and ship them to markets fresh.

There are many ways to package an oyster, and all areas should be explored before settling on the best and most cost-efficient fit for a producer's business.

Branding Tips:

- 1) Taste the finished product—make sure it meets the standard set by the company.
- 2) Test for pathogens.
- 3) Always follow all regulations set by the state in which the

oysters are produced.

- 4) Always check the branding laws for a state. Many states require a commercial oyster license, or ownership of a private lease.
- 5) Oysters must be of a certain maximum size.
- 6) Some states require the brand name to be registered, often for a small fee.
- 7) Market the new brand to raw bars, oyster festivals, restaurants, and tasting rooms to get a brand into the public eye and stomach.

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