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The Last Fish House

Ask An Aquaculturist

War-Torn Castine

Growing Shellfish Was a ‘Trial by Fire’

Deep ties to Stonington led Abby Barrows to oyster farming

BY JACK BEAUDOIN // PHOTOS BY KATHERINE EMERY



Abby Barrows sorts through materials and designs used in the last year to replace plastic aquaculture equipment: steel, aluminum, cedar, hemp, cork and mycelium floats, basalt and manila rope.

Stonington native Abby Barrows owns and operates the Deer Isle Oyster Company, a small-scale aquaculture farm where she raises oysters, sugar kelp, and—experimentally for now—dulse and scallops.

While she was born and raised on Deer Isle, Barrows' journey—fueled by a restless, wandering spirit—has been anything but short, straight, and narrow. She earned her bachelor's degree at the University of Tasmania in Australia, worked for a year in Papua, New Guinea, traveled throughout Indonesia, and spent time in Singapore, Nepal, and the Middle East. She's conducted sea turtle research in Uruguay, led a scientific expedition to Antarctica as part of her research into microplastics pollution, and explored Fiji.

But after a stint teaching marine science on a 125-foot schooner, she returned to Stonington and opened a new chapter in her life with her husband, Ben Jackson, and their six-year-old daughter, Io.

IJ: Your early career reminds me of the line from the Johnny Cash song that goes, "I been everywhere, man." But the first thing a visitor learns on your website is that you live on a small Maine island and the community and its relationship to the ocean is your central passion. What brought you home?

BARROWS: Stonington—all of Deer Isle—is a really special place, but you don't appreciate a lot of things when you're younger. And I really did have to leave it to love it. Traveling, living abroad, and exploring the world just magnified how unique this community and this island was.

I found myself drawn back here for a number of different reasons. But I think just that really strong sense of place, having my roots here, and also feeling like I could come back and be more of a contributor, more of an active, conscientious "liver" of being here.

IJ: So you didn't come back with the intention of becoming an aquaculturist?

BARROWS: Not at all! I came back when I was broke. At first, I did a lot of hand work and house painting and working on lobster boats, and through that process got to become reacquainted with the community.

In the winter I continued to do research—feeding that part of me that wasn't being fed by the pick-up work—and that led to a position at the Shaw Institute in Blue Hill.

It was through that work that I met Ginny Olsen, who was chair of the island's shellfish committee, ran a clam shucking business, a seafood dealer, and a lobster woman. We worked on some water quality issues together and I knew that—in addition to everything else she did—she had an aquaculture lease.

I called her one day to see about getting some oysters, and when she called back, she said, "I don't have any oysters for sale, but would you like to buy the farm?"

IJ: And you said yes?

BARROWS: I leapt at the opportunity. I mean, I had no business background. I couldn't even balance my checkbook. I didn't have any money and nothing but a rowboat to operate from. I'd never been on an oyster farm before. And yet it happened. Six or eight months later, I'm out there with Ginny and her husband Blaine and we're raising the farm. It was a real trial-by-fire, a very steep learning curve.

IJ: I understand there's a gene for risk-taking...

BARROWS: Well, it was just a side hustle. I was still working, so the farm was something I was doing evenings or on the weekend. I bought 80,000 oysters and probably killed a bunch of them through ignorance. But it was year one, in a rowboat pulling bags and trying to figure it all out, but it wasn't front and center like it is now.

IJ: How did that transition happen?

BARROWS: When I bought the farm in 2015, I sold off the market-ready oysters—the farm hadn't been worked for a few years, so there wasn't much of an incoming crop. When I reseeded, I knew it would take two or three years before they reached market size.

So 2016 and 2017 were fallow years of just tending and learning what I was doing out there, but not harvesting and pushing the market side of things. By 2017, I started to figure out retail and do more of that public facing part of the business, not just farming.

By 2018, after having a baby planned around the oyster season, I think we realized, "Oh, we can really make this into our bread and butter."

IJ: You've reached an inflection point in your business, haven't you? Most Maine aquaculture leases are under five acres, and that makes it hard to grow—to generate the revenue to hire help and invest.

BARROWS: We are growing and reinvesting. In addition to Ben and I, we have an events coordinator, two farm hands, a farm manager assistant, and contract with a small army of shuckers, 10-15 people, through the high season.

We have an application with the Department of Marine Resources for a second commercial lease in Pickering Cove. We've always been extremely hyper-local—like Brooklin or Brooksville were the furthest we went with our oysters—but with the new lease we are going to be producing a lot more oysters and expanding our markets.



Abby Barrows and her husband Ben built cedar boxes with hemp rope to replace plastic crates. These are traditional lobster crates that were in common circulation until a few decades ago.

IJ: Living in Stonington, one understands the rhythms, hours, and seasonality of lobstering. What kind of schedule does an oyster farm follow?

BARROWS: Almost everyone buys babies from a hatchery and they're spawned to order. So you order babies in the early winter, put your down payment in, and take delivery, depending on the size of the baby that you order (1-12 millimeters in size). The larger the size, the later they come.

Here in Down East Maine, it takes two to four years for them to grow to market size. Seasonally, oysters stop putting on shell when the water temperature drops below 52, and they stop feeding once it drops into the low 40s.

We lower the farm after Thanksgiving when they hibernate because the water temperature is much more stable at the bottom. It's an easier environment for them to hibernate in. And also, because of the storms, especially in the last decade, the frequency and the violence of the storms has really increased. It just protects everything to have it on the seafloor. You raise them in the spring, depending on the weather, and we might not see enough growth to start harvesting until late May.

IJ: So there's down time in the winter?

BARROWS: Right [laughs]. The boats need work. The licenses are due. You reach out to restaurants that are too busy to meet with you in summer months. Last year, we turned a lobster pound in Connery Cove into an oyster pound, harvested 15,000 oysters, and stashed them there for winter sales and events. It's basically cold storage and it's smoothed out some of the seasonal cash flows issues.

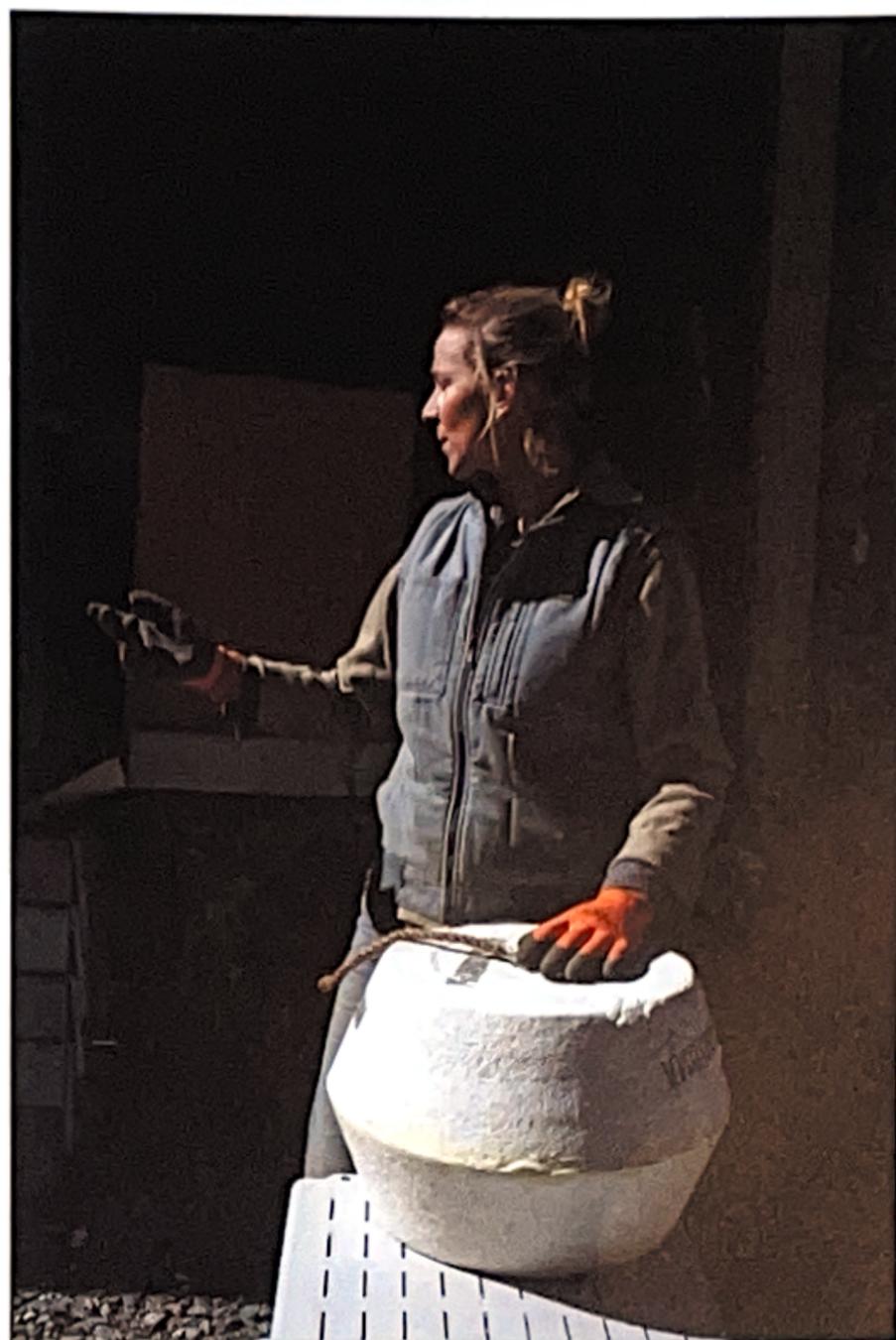
IJ: As someone who grew up here, knows most of the lobstermen, the clambers, how do you think aquaculture fits in with more traditional harvesting?

BARROWS: There's a lot of space around here for aquaculture to grow or to be a supplement to people's existing income. A lot of lobstermen throughout Maine now grow kelp in the winter. And I think we're just going to see more and more scallop farms popping up and that's really exciting to me.

Our wild populations of mussels have tanked recently, so I would love to see more mussel farms. Urchins are intriguing. I think there's a lot of potential to expand into different seaweeds, although Americans generally don't like to eat seaweed.

IJ: What's next for Deer Isle Oyster Company?

BARROWS: My vision and hope is to build out the Pickering Cove lease from the ground up as a plastic-free farm. As a



Barrows tests Mycobuoys, a mycelium-based buoy designed to replace plastic buoys.

plastics researcher, it was really hard for me to stomach the fact that the aquaculture industry is inundated with plastic.

Every single thing out in the water, basically, that you touch other than the animal is plastic. We need to be thinking about different ways of doing this. R&D is hard when you are running a farm, but we've developed a prototype that I am pretty happy with.

And there are a lot of farmers really interested in this—oyster farmers are stewards of the environment because they have to be, because their livelihoods depend on the water quality where you're growing your animals.

Jack Beaudoin is a former reporter with the Journal Tribune and Portland Press Herald, founder of Healthcare IT News, a former board member of the Maine Monitor, and editor of The Maine Review. He lives in Stonington.