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In this frigid season, Rhode Island oyster farmers see their business boom as many growers in Cape Cod and Canada run out of oysters or stop working because of the ice

BY **BINA VENKATARAMAN**

NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SOUTH KINGSTOWN, RHODE ISLAND



"How many do you need?" Perry Raso shouted into a walkie-talkie as his motorboat plowed through chunks of ice in Potters Pond, his face ruddy from the biting wind and his eyelashes encrusted with snow.

Raso had spent a snowy morning harvesting oysters from a salt pond separated by a barrier beach from Block Island Sound. Clad in a waterproof suit, he waded waist-deep into the icy soup, lifted giant mesh bags of bivalves from the bottom, and poured out the oysters that had reached a size suitable for market.

"Ten bags," replied the wholesaler on the walkie-talkie.

The news was good — and bad. Raso would be able to sell 1,000 more oysters, a harvest worth at least US\$600, but he would have to return the next day when temperatures were expected to fall into the single digits.

In this frigid season, Raso and other Rhode Island oyster farmers see their business boom as many growers in Cape Cod and Canada run out of oysters or stop working because of the ice. During the first three months of 2008, Raso gathered more than half of the 400,000 oysters he sold during the entire year.

Oyster farming once thrived in the Ocean State. In the early 1900s, leases for underwater oyster farms stretched across about a third of Narragansett Bay and shucking houses lined its shores. Today, dozens of growers are trying to revive the industry, which was wiped out by parasites, pollutants, and a devastating hurricane. The wintertime harvest is how they get an edge with customers who crave oysters year-round and want a steady supply.

"In the last 10 years, there's been a big resurgence," said David Alves, the state's aquaculture coordinator. It began in the late 1980s, when Moonstone Oyster Farm secured a lease to grow oysters in Point Judith Pond, near the state's southeastern tip. In just a few years, Moonstone showed that growing oysters could yield a good profit.

"Some fishermen saw the writing on the

wall: 'If there are not going to be a lot of fish around, we have to find another way to make a living,'" Alves said.

In 1996, Rhode Island had only six oyster farms on 3.6 hectares. Today, it has 30 farms spanning more than 48 hectares. While this pales in comparison with the industry's more than 8,000 hectares of state waters at its peak in the early 20th century, the value of oyster farming, now over US\$1 million, has grown an average of 10 percent each year for the last several years.

Oyster farmers lease underwater tracts from the state, and construct grids of mesh bags roped together. They buy oyster seeds, as small as grains of sand, and plant them in bins near their docks. When the oysters have reached nearly 2.5cm in size, the growers transfer them into the bags in deeper water, then typically wait two to three years before harvesting the shellfish.

The state's estuaries host ripe conditions for growing oysters quickly, which means growers can give wholesalers, restaurants, and supermarkets a consistent supply. Because of factors, including salt content and temperature, oysters do not reproduce as well in Rhode Island waters as in other parts of New England. But this is a boon for the farmers — the oysters use most of their food to get plump rather than spawn, and growers can buy new seed each summer.

On Cape Cod, in contrast, most growers move their oysters to underground bunkers in December to protect them from winter ice damage, said Dale Leavitt, a professor at Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island, who worked in the Massachusetts aquaculture industry for 15 years.

Wellfleet oysters, for example, thrive in the shallow coastal zones between the high and low tide lines, but the 1.2m blocks of ice that form this time of year can kill them. "In Rhode Island, our growers have more reliable access to the oysters year-round because they are in deeper water," Leavitt said.

Rhode Island oysters tend to be briny and crisp. "But the flavor of the oyster will depend on the season," said Raso, the president of the Ocean State Aquaculture Association and a former fisherman. In the late fall and winter, as the oysters store up sugars to insulate themselves from the cold, they taste sweeter than during the summer, he said.

Despite the recession, Raso is now selling 5,000 to 10,000 oysters per week for US\$0.60 to US\$0.90 each, depending on the quantity ordered. He sells to chains like Whole Foods and McCormick & Schmick's, where they are labeled as Matunuck oysters. He also sells them to high-end restaurants and to wholesalers.

Like the state's oyster revival, Rhode Island's growers are generally young.

"At least half of the growers here are under 40," said Raso, who is 29 and put himself through college and graduate school by diving for steamers in the same salt pond where he now grows oysters.

The farmers also tend to see their work as more than a job. "A lot of people do it because they love it," said Marta Gomez-Chiarri, a professor at the University of Rhode Island who researches aquaculture in New England. "One guy I know took six years to make a profit. It's a choice for that lifestyle of being in the water."

Raso made no money the first two years he was in business, but said he now brings in a steady income. He has no complaints about this finger-numbing work, though on cold days like this he rushes indoors every few hours to rub his hands together under hot water.

"In the wintertime, people think I'm crazy," he said. "But in the summertime, they think I have the best job in the world."

Above left: Oyster farmer Perry Raso in South Kingstown, Rhode Island. Raso has no complaints about this finger-numbing work, though on cold days he rushes indoors every few hours to rub his hands together under hot water.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Shucking off the cold

[FILM]

Story of Chinese opera star heads up Berlinale Asian lineup

Though a batch of movies from Asian directors has been selected for next month's festival, South Korea is notable by its absence from the Golden Bear list

BY **ANDREW MCCTHIE**

DPA, BERLIN

A movie about a famed 20th-century Chinese opera star heads the Asian cinema lineup at next month's Berlin Film Festival.

In a sense, the story of Mei Lan-fang (梅蘭芳) represents a return for Beijing-born director Chen Kaige (陳凱歌) to a familiar theme with his famed *Farewell My Concubine* (霸王別姬) also focusing on the stars of the Beijing opera.

Farewell My Concubine won Kaige the Cannes Film Festival's prestigious Palme d'Or in 1993.

Starring Beijing-born Zhang Ziyi (章子怡) and Japanese actor Masanobu Ando, Kaige's new movie, *Forever Enthralled* (梅蘭芳), is the only film from an Asian director that is in this year's race for the Berlinale's top honors, the Golden Bear.

Indeed, despite the

recent success that Japanese moviemakers have enjoyed at major film festivals around the world, no film from Japan has been included in this year's Berlinale main competition.

A batch of movies from Asian directors has been selected for this year's festival, including from Indonesia, Singapore, South Korea and Japan.

Striking, though, is the absence of Korean filmmakers from the competition for the Golden Bear. But this appears to be another sign of the scale of the crisis that has recently engulfed Korea's film industry with layoffs having been on the rise as the box office has shrunk and companies have cut back movie production.

This comes in the wake of a glut of films made during the

industry's rapid development during the last decade or more.

Moreover, the current problems facing the Korean movie business could soon begin to emerge in other parts of the Asian film industry as a slowdown tightens its grip on the world economy and consequently Asia as well.

In the meantime, this also gives other smaller filmmaking nations such as Taiwan and Indonesia the chance to carve out a bigger profile at the world's leading film festivals.

This is especially the case as the digital revolution helps to lower movie production costs and boosts the industry in smaller nations.

With this in mind, this year's Berlinale will also help to



Yu Shaoqun, left, and director Chen Kaige pose during a promotional event for *Forever Enthralled*, in Tokyo, on Jan. 21. PHOTO: AP

underscore how a new generation of filmmakers is beginning to shape the Asian movie industry. The Panorama section's

strong emphasis on Asian cinema includes Chinese director Zou Peng's (鄒鵬) *A North Chinese Girl* (東北·東北) and Taiwanese director Cheng Yu-chieh (鄭有傑) *Yang Yang* (陽陽) as well as *The Casuarina Cove* from Singaporean director Junfeng Boo and Simon Chung's *End of Love*.

All are to have their world premiere in Berlin next month. *Gururi No Koto* (All Around Us) from Hashigushi Ryosuke is representing Japan.

Indonesia has two entries in this year's Panorama, including *At Stake* in which five directors essentially explore the role of women in the world's most populous Muslim nation.

In addition, for the first time, Malaysia, whose filmmakers have been gaining international

recognition in recent years, has set up a stand at the European Film Market, the business side of the Berlinale.

One theme of this year's Panorama section is about people's lives in the unstable world of Kashmir, Pakistan and Kabul.

Included in the Panorama program is Khalid Gill's *Kiss the Moon* about the threat to those wanting to pursue a transgender life in Pakistan at a time when a battle is raging over the nation's cultural identity.

But it is the race for the Golden Bear that will inevitably be the main focus of the Berlinale.

A member of the so-called fifth generation of Chinese filmmakers, who began their moviemaking careers during the chaos of Mao Zedong's (毛澤東) Cultural

Revolution, 56-year-old Kaige's *Forever Enthralled* comes in the wake of his less-than-successful 2005 epic fantasy film *The Promise* (無極).

His *Farewell My Concubine*'s success helped to bring China's fifth generation directors to world attention.

But while *Farewell My Concubine* told the story of the impact on people's lives of the upheaval unleashed by the Cultural Revolution during the middle of the last century, in *Forever Enthralled*, Kaige moves back another step in Chinese history.

Mei's life unfolds in *Forever Enthralled* against the backdrop of international turmoil during the first half of the last century, which included the occupation of China by the Japanese.