

# Shellfish get new digs, rave reviews

By REBECCA WELLS

Live music and fresh shellfish greeted guests of a recent open house Taylor Shellfish Farms hosted to showcase its new facility.

Taking about a year to build, the \$3.5-million, 22,000-square-foot processing plant is now located at the company's headquarters in Mason County. The state-of-the-art facility is the result of increased demand and a major shift in how Taylor is farming and marketing oysters.

Historically, oysters on the West Coast have been farmed using a cultch-and-cluster method where oyster spat is collected on cultch, usually oyster shells, and spread over the tideland resulting in clusters of oysters at harvest time which are brought to a plant for shucking. When oysters are shucked for meats, the appearance of the oyster in the shell isn't critical.

The current emphasis is on nicely shaped, single oysters for the domestic half-shell trade and Latin and Asian in-shell markets.

WITH THIS in mind, "cultch-less" single-oyster seed is produced at Taylor's hatcheries in Quilceno and Kona, Hawaii, by introducing finely ground oyster shell to the larva tank. The oyster shell particles are so small, there is only surface area enough for one microscopic larva to attach to it. Once attached, the larva becomes "spat" and grows into a single oyster seed. Grow-out techniques for seed oysters at Taylor farming locations depend on bottom type and oyster species.

"We've been running shifts 24 hours a day to keep up with demand," says Austin Docter, plant manager. "The new plant will give

us the opportunity to quadruple our production in just one shift and will provide capacity for growth."

In addition to increasing capacity, the company will be able to handle fresher product more quickly, colder and more efficiently. "We'll be sending a better-quality product to the market," Docter said.

With impeccable sanitation essential when working with live shellfish, the new facility is designed for easy, thorough and regular cleaning. Specialty oysters will be graded to the gram at the rate of four oysters per second by a system designed for Taylor by the Marel-Carnitec Company of Iceland. This processing time is about three times faster than that of the previous system and this will allow the business to add more shifts.

THE LATTEST in nitrogen quick-freezing technology will be used in the production of frozen top-off oysters for a growing market. The new facility has an 850-pallet freezer storage capacity, requiring the new plant to employ 12 new people immediately.

Demand for one particular oyster Taylor produces, the Totten Inlet Virginica, which is harvested specifically in Totten Inlet, is growing. Nationally known food connoisseur John Rowley of Seattle, who does marketing for Taylor and other food businesses, heartily endorsed this oyster in an article *The New York Times* published this April.

"The oysterers speak for themselves. People taste a good oyster, you know, and they'll reorder it," said Rowley in an interview with this newspaper.

The Virginica oyster is native

to the East Coast, but Rowley said some combination of algae, minerals and sunlight on Totten Inlet make the shellfish grown in this area taste "plump, sweet and perky." He calls local conditions "incredible to grow in," adding that the Virginica oysters, especially, have a complex, slightly mineral flavor and a pleasant aftertaste.

ROWLEY SAYS these same oyster grown elsewhere just don't have the same flavor. "It's really, really, really good," he said. Though Virginicas are a relatively new oyster to be harvested in this region, Rowley said, the name "Totten Inlet" is already on the map among those in the half-shell oyster circle.

Taylor expects demand for this oyster to continue rising, too, having sold 40,000 dozen Virginicas this year and projects the sale of about 200,000 dozen next year, and even more in 2008, Docter said.

Virginica oysters are popular served on the half shell, as are the Kumamoto variety. Both offer very nice characteristics for eating raw, said Bill Dewey, who works in Taylor's public affairs. He said these oysters are the most popular at the company right now, though Taylor produces far more Pacific oysters, which are more suited to growing in this area.

Taylor mastered the technique for growing Virginicas a few years ago, said Docter. "There's been quite a resurgence in oyster bars throughout the country, so we try

to be a critical supplier of a variety of types," Dewey added.

VIRGINICAS AND Kumamotos are among about five primary oyster selections Taylor grows, along with Pacific, Olympia and European flats.

Taylor Shellfish Farms is a fourth-generation family-owned

company with 375 employees farming shellfish on 9,000 acres of owned and leased tideland in Puget Sound and Willapa Bay. The company produces Manila clams, Mediterranean mussels, geoduck and a variety of live, shucked and frozen oysters for national and international markets.



**LOOKING UP** from the line are two employees of Taylor Shellfish Farms. They are working inside the company's brand-new facility on a new machine designed to quickly sort and grade oysters.