

Delicious Immigrant: The Kumamoto Oyster

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Totten Inlet, Wash. -- "They're awesome. They're just awesome," exclaimed Art May as he picked a Kumamoto oyster off the bed in which it grew, shucked it, slurped it down and sloshed off into the dark of night. This carefree, hip-boot-clad farmer at Taylor United, a fourth-generation family-owned shellfish company in Shelton, Wash., couldn't have been more accurate.

Also exploring the tidelands on this calm cool evening was the company's 39-year-old president, Bill Taylor. He was checking Kumamotos started about three years ago and he, too, liked what he found. Crouched over a bed containing 300,000 market-size Kumos, Mr. Taylor held his oyster knife and chose prime specimens -- 2-inch oysters with deep cups that, when opened, smelled of the clean salt water they came from and revealed plump juicy morsels. When eaten off the half shell, they were slightly chewy and fabulously sweet with little more than a salty aftertaste.

Although these treasures of the tidelands are now being raised by a handful of growers on the West Coast and are sought by savvy oyster lovers nationwide, the Kumamoto's home base was a city of the same name in the Kyushu prefecture of southern Japan. The road between the two was no straight line.

After World War II, under the military occupation of Japan by General Douglas MacArthur, the Japanese were developing new industries that used their natural resources, one of which involved exporting the Kumamoto seedlings. (There was no domestic market for the Kumo, as the Japanese tend to prefer larger oysters.) Although the export of oyster seeds from Japan wasn't anything new -- Pacific oyster seedlings (*Crassostrea gigas*) were shipped to the U.S. for years before the war -- the seeds of the small Kumo had never been harvested with the intent of sale and export.

In 1947 the Washington Department of Fisheries sent two biologists, John Glude and Cedric Lindsay, to Japan. Their mission was to find a replacement for the West Coast's then rapidly declining and cherished Olympia oyster, to re-establish the prewar seedling trade and to investigate recent developments in the seedling industry.

While there, Mr. Glude and Mr. Lindsay heard about Dr. Takeo Imai, a professor of biology at the University of Sendai, who was teaching the Kumamoto residents how to harvest Kumo seedlings and prepare them for possible export to the U.S. Curious, they traveled from Sendai to Kumamoto and liked what they saw. Mr. Glude, now retired, recalled, "I found the Kumamoto to be a very good oyster and inspected the seeds for predators and pests. As they were `clean,' I made arrangements for the seedlings to be placed in boxes and sent to the States." That first shipment was experimental and planted by the Washington Department of Fisheries throughout the Puget Sound. Some seedlings survived and some didn't.

Undeterred, local oyster growers got into the act and placed their own orders. By 1953 more than 3,000 cases had been shipped from Kumamoto. Called *Crassostrea sikamea* in Latin, the Kumo turned out to be a fine substitute for the Olympia. Although larger than the native (it takes about 2,000 Oly meats to fill a one-gallon jar and 250 Kumos to do the same), it has a more delicate refined flavor than the Oly and a subtler aftertaste. The oyster farmers liked it, as it was available during June, July and August when the Olympia spawned and couldn't be sold.

Nonetheless, the odds were against the little Japanese oyster, and the industry couldn't take off. First, the Kumo is slow growing and takes around three years to reach its full size of about 2 inches. Also, because the oyster couldn't spawn in the region's cold water, the growers were dependent on Japan for the seedlings, and as shipping costs increased, the project became prohibitively expensive. Other factors, according to Mr. Lindsay, now also retired, were that the supply from Japan was inconsistent and that the Japanese market for other seedlings opened up, creating an easier and more accessible market for the Japanese producers.

So, the American oyster growers simply concentrated on the larger, easier-to-grow Pacific oyster. In the meantime the little Japanese oysters grew to full size and survived in the bays and inlets where they were originally sown. It wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s that the Kumamoto started to resurface in the industry. Only then, it developed a new identity.

In 1968 a major breakthrough in the oyster industry occurred -- hatcheries were developed and biologists and growers could manipulate when oysters spawned. The technology also let scientists cross the Kumamoto with the profitable Pacific oyster. For research purposes, they hoped to create a new animal that would have the deep cup of the Kumamoto and the Pacific's ability to grow quickly. Unfortunately, Gigomoto, as the new breed was called, was a bust.

Dr. Anja M. Robinson, who is a researcher at the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at the Hatfield Marine Science Center at Oregon State University in Newport, and has been working with the Kumamoto for more than 25 years, explained, "Gigomoto was a watery oyster that didn't have the deep cup of the Kumamoto at all. The cross was useless and, if anything, it picked up the worst features of the two species." Unfortunately, once that was realized, it was too late. Gigomoto had already worked its way into the industry.

Around 1989 biologists and oyster growers thought the quickest fix to the problem was to go back to Kumamoto and just get new seedlings. The solution wasn't that simple. Biologists went back to the region in Japan and returned with numerous samples of what they thought were pure Kumamotos. After being tested by Dennis Hedgecock, a geneticist from the Bodega Marine Laboratory in the University of California at Davis in Bodega Bay, it was determined they weren't, and to date a pure Kumamoto has yet to be found again in its homeland.

In 1991 at a meeting sponsored by the Oregon Sea Grant Program, it occurred to Dr. Robinson that there must be some pure Kumamotos still in the local waters where they were sown by oyster growers more than 30 years before. With unanimous approval from others in the industry, she encouraged growers to go out to old oyster beds and hunt for them.

The folks at Taylor United did just that. About 25 years ago the family purchased an isolated piece of waterfront land, more for its access to the bay than its ability to produce fat juicy oysters. They remembered that the old-timer they purchased it from had grown Kumos. Bill Taylor recalled, "We knew we had a precious commodity on that land and went out looking for it." They found more than 200 old gnarled Kumos that resembled rocks more than the animals they truly were. When run through the hatchery, the oysters eventually spawned 107 million eggs. Since then, Taylor's production of Kumos has doubled annually, and this year they expect to put about half a million Kumos on dinner plates around the country.

Realizing that the only pure specimens left may be in the U.S., American biologists and Kumamoto farmers are going full steam ahead to save any they do have. Dr. Robinson recently received a Saltonstall-Kennedy grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and with it is rounding up and testing any Kumamotos still kicking around. Her ultimate goal is to ensure the survival and preserve the integrity of the species and to make sure that when oyster lovers order a Kumamoto, they're getting the real thing.

Such ambitious efforts don't go unnoticed. Sandy Ingber, the purchasing agent for the Grand Central Oyster Bar in New York, buys more than 1,300 Kumamotos each week and reports, "They just fly out of here. They are so sweet and creamy our customers love them."