

REEF RECOVERY

The oyster reefs on Mississippi's Gulf Coast are open for business, for now.

by julian brunt | photography by neil ladner





The "oyster lady" of Pass Christian, Darlene Kimball has been serving up fresh seafood with a smile for decades. Kimball has wanted to work in the industry since childhood. After Katrina and the BP Oil Spill, Mississippi's oyster reefs experienced a dramatic decline.



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PHOTOS COURTESY OF MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF MARINE RESOURCES



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Mississippi Department of Marine Resources held an oyster relay program in January of 2016 to move thousands of sacks of oysters from a reef in western Harrison County. The oysters needed to be moved because of the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway in New Orleans. The spillway was opened to reduce the risk of flooding to property from the Mississippi River. Nearly 40 oyster harvesters participated and moved 40,000 sacks of oysters out of harm's way. Oyster tongs work a reef near Pass Christian. Oysters are harvested by tonging, done by hand with tools or by tonging dredges that are mechanical. The number of oysters harvested has decreased in the last decade due to such events as Hurricane Katrina, the BP Oil Spill, and the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway in New Orleans. In 2004, nearly 500,000 sacks of oysters were harvested, compared to just over 40,000 in 2016.

Even as summer ends and the first hints of fall arrive, it can still be hot on the docks. A persistent wind blows from the southwest, making it bearable. Even with the breeze, it is hot. But the real struggle is under the water. Mississippi's oyster reefs are far from thriving. Plans are being laid to help the oyster population rebound to what it was before Hurricane Katrina and the BP oil spill, however, the steps to improvement take a great amount of money and people. Several programs and groups are working together to make restoration of the Gulf's oyster population a reality.

On the dock in Pass Christian, Darlene Kimball pushes her blond hair out of her eyes, but it falls back down. It's more a gesture of habit than a means to an end. Kimball is fondly known as the "oyster lady" of Pass Christian Harbor. A local customer stops by and wants to know if she has speckled trout, and she replies, "I've got specks, flounder, Gulf tuna, amberjack, and a few mullet." With a persistent smile, she always is eager to help her customers in any way she can.

As the customer walks away with his trout, Kimball turns and says, "I love what I do; it is what I have wanted to do since I was a little girl, but I don't know if I want my daughter to follow

in my footsteps." She thinks for a moment and adds, "I have watched friends of mine who have normal jobs. They have days off, insurance, and paid vacation. That's not the way this business works. I work for Mother Nature. She holds all the cards. Katrina was a big hit, a huge hit. Before Katrina, I had more than 50 oyster boats to work with. Now, I am lucky to get eight. Then the oil spill happened. Something needs to change."

The oyster reefs are under stress and many statistics do not have good numbers, but the Governor's Oyster Council on Restoration and Resiliency (made up of citizens, scientists, and seafood industry leaders) released its final recommendations in a June 2015 report. The needs are big and the challenge is great. According to the Department of Marine Resources, in 2004, 491,050 sacks of oysters were harvested in Mississippi waters for the fiscal year that runs July 1 through June 30. In 2014, just 78,019 sacks were harvested as a result of Katrina, the BP oil spill, and the opening of the Bonnet Carré Spillway (the infusion of too much fresh water kills the oysters).

In fact, some biologists think the oyster reefs should not be opened at all, but be allowed to restore themselves for a long period of time, however, that is a long, slow process. Some sug-

gest new technology might help, or a program to recycle shells and replace them on the reefs, developing better dredges that do less damage, adding new reefs in different places, and, as always, education.

But many people are hopeful. "If we're going to reach our goal of harvesting 1 million sacks a year in 10 years, public reefs can only do so much. We need to incentivize the private sector," says Jamie Miller, executive director of the Mississippi Department of Marine Resources. "Another big piece of this is aquaculture. You have to help Mother Nature along sometimes. We need to be aggressive." The success of this goal will extend the goals of increasing oyster harvest and creating new jobs and business opportunities while improving the environment through species recovery, habitat creation, and improved water quality, according to the Oyster Council's report. It is a very ambitious plan, but it would place the state at the forefront of the oyster industry in this country. J. Scott Gordon, director of the Shellfish Bureau, says, "Progress is being made, but it is slow. We have had drought, oyster drills, and a handful of other problems besides the oil spill and Katrina. The harvest for 2015-2016 was just 40,357 sacks. What is going to make a

real difference is aquaculture." Aquaculture is the farming of oysters in natural waters, but in controlled environments.

According to the National Fish and Wildlife Federation, the Oyster Restoration and Management program is in the beginning phases. This project, which was awarded funds in November 2015 to the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality, seeks to improve oyster populations and sustainability of the Mississippi coast by conducting several studies to better understand why oyster populations are not more resilient and how productivity of the oysters can be improved. The studies will provide project managers with information needed to complete restoration projects and improve cost-effectiveness. The studies include research of cultch-type, contaminated oyster shells, water quality, and benthic habitat assessments in the sound to provide a list of good locations for future restoration projects. Another part of the program will be "oyster gardening" to produce oysters for conservation purposes. In March, a pre-bid meeting was held, where coordination of risk assessment of sub-recipients took place, and the benthic habitat mapping RFQ was developed and released.

Back on the docks, Kimball, a petite blonde who is full



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Kimball's is a great spot to find all varieties of seafood. Locals Abigail and Christopher Hayes check out the daily catch. Fresh crab and shrimp are readily available. ABOVE: Kimball announces her fresh catches on a chalkboard.



of energy, has a ready smile for anyone who walks up. Often the fishermen she buys from have been shrimping all night, or working a pair of oyster tongs through a long hot day. They aren't in the mood for joking around. They are tired, hot, and want to get their money and go home. Sometimes the price Kimball quoted when they departed for the day has changed by the time they return with their catch, and when she tells them of the change they are plenty mad, but they know Kimball is giving them the best deal she can. That's the kind of relationship they have.

"Sometimes I sit in church and light candles," she says. I ask, "Lord, are you even listening to me? But I know He is, it can just be so frustrating. I've got to juggle my bills." Over the course of just one afternoon Kimball has to haggle with the man she buys ice from, a DMR patrol stops by just to check things out, a repair man brings back a pair of scales the state says weren't working right, and a buyer from up north comes by and does his best to get her to drop her prices if he buys 200 pounds of shrimp. Someone wants to know where they can buy dry ice and a 90-quart cooler, and dozens of seafood customers stop by—all requiring her attention and smile. By five o'clock she is bushed, but sometimes her day stretches until eight o'clock or even later.

Kimball's Seafood is very seldom slow. Sometimes it is a steady trickle of people. More often it seems to come in ill-timed waves. A commercial customer calls and asks for crabmeat. She explains what she has, and he says, "Give me three,

three, and three," which translates into three lump crab, three claw, and three jumbo lump. As she hangs up the phone another customer walks up and asks for tripletail. The customer asks for ice and Kimball smiles and says, "Well, I guess I could." As if there was any question at all about her willingness to do whatever she can to be helpful.

What Kimball's has to sell is dependent on the season and conditions, but it is the oysters that are harvested in the cool months that Pass Christian and Kimball are known for. There are 14,000 acres of oyster reefs just off shore, and when conditions are right, they are famously salty and sweet, but for years now the conditions have not been right.

Nobody in this part of the world ever followed a mule into a red dirt cotton field, but for generations they have turned south and faced the salty water and its bounty. Farming and the seafood industry have a lot in common; both are dependent on the capricious whims of Mother Nature. But times change, and the casinos now employ many more people than the seafood industry.

As the day ends, Kimball finally grabs a folding chair and sits down. She extends her arms as if to embrace the world around her and says, "This is my corporate office, the sunrise, the sunset, and the cool breeze."

Times may be tough, the future of this industry may not be clear, but tough people like Darlene Kimball aren't going to quit. What are the odds that her daughter will fill her shoes one day? My guess is those odds are quite good. M