

# LIVING OFF THE LAND & SEA

Story and photos by  
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Sally Andreola and her husband Scott Leonhardt work Mant's Landing Oysters in Brewster.

*These spotlights are of four independent harvesters who grow and bring us food on Cape Cod. Different experiences led me to them. I saw the cross-hatches of an oyster farm interrupting an otherwise empty intertidal landscape, and realized I had no idea how an oyster was raised. I watched a lobster boat, so tiny in scale, steam parallel to the distant horizon, regal in its detachment and aloneness from where I stood and wished I were on deck. A simple salad of greens or pasta, cooked with fresh local ingredients, set before me delivered a visual and flavorful experience unheard of with grocery store fare.*

*All four harvesters share a love for Cape Cod, a personal standard for healthy food, and the joy of being out in nature while they work. They can't imagine doing anything else.*

*The following in no way fully describes these people's lives. Rather, they are meant as a reminder, when we shop or partake at a restaurant, that what we eat extends far beyond the kitchen, the delivery truck, and our plate.*

### **Sally Andreola, Mant's Landing Oysters**

From a distance it looks as if Sally Andreola might be praying. She is kneeling in the few inches of water left behind by the receding tide at Mant's Landing in Brewster, and her head is bowed. As you get closer you can see her lips are moving. "One, two, three, four," she quietly mouths. "Five, six, seven, eight." Is she praying? Is she sorting

oysters, counting out one hundred to a bag? Or is she doing both?

Andreola and her husband, Scott Leonhardt, work Mant's Landing Oysters, a grant set against a backdrop of shoreline that can make them look as if they're figures in a giant Impressionist painting. She is a retired schoolteacher and quite correctly insisted on including the possessive apostrophe in her company's name. Mant's Landing Oysters is one of the farthest and also was one of the first grants off the town beach at the end of Robbins Hill Road. She's been working the same half-acre for 15 years. "I could have requested more, but a half-acre seemed liked a good place to start," she says. "With just Scott and me working the farm, we really couldn't handle more."

Andreola and Leonhardt tend approximately 170 trays that sit a foot, more or less, off the sand during low tide. Over time, the sands have shifted so now she and Leonhardt have a longer walk to the grant, and can be working in a few inches of water depending on the tide when they get there. The advantage, though, is that Andreola's oysters stay in the water, receiving nutrients longer between tides. Each year she orders 100,000 seed oysters, and harvests from 60,000 to 80,000 full-grown oysters that she sells to Big Rock Oyster Company in Harwich and Island Creek Oysters in Duxbury. What she doesn't harvest she winters over and hopes they survive into the next year. Here on Cape Cod it takes an oyster sometimes three years to grow to the legal limit of two-and-a-half inches for farm-raised oysters, three inches if caught wild.



## David DeWitt, Dave's Greens

"I was in a 32-year organic rut," says David DeWitt, owner of Dave's Greens, in Truro. For all of those years, DeWitt was practicing organic farming the way he was taught as a student at College of the Redwoods in Eureka, California. Then a few years ago at a conference on growing cannabis in California, he was exposed to Korean Natural Farming (KNF), a way of farming that looks at the entire farm holistically. Now, the former site of Rock Spray Nursery, which DeWitt transitioned into vegetable farming in 2012, is undergoing a transformation, literally from the ground up.

"Regenerative farming is where we're heading," DeWitt explains. "It's about the soil/food web, and KNF incorporates all of the indigenous microorganisms to foster a healthy food web."

It all starts with a box of rice planted in the soil. DeWitt grows his own mycelium—the part of a colony of bacteria that searches for nutrients. Think of it as the way a baker uses starter to make sourdough bread. He cooks some rice al dente, and puts it in a box or a basket, though any container that allows

organisms in the soil to enter the rice will work. He then makes a small excavation in the soil by scraping the duff away, and plants the box in the depression and covers it with a paper towel. In a week or so, microorganisms will have colonized in the box, and fine, white, threadlike mycelium should be growing on top and throughout the rice. "You want to have a nice blanket of white on top," DeWitt says.

Through a very simple process of doubling and tripling ingredients, DeWitt adds equal parts of brown sugar to the mixture, then later adding up to 40 to 60 pounds of compost. "Over time, I start with a few billion organisms from under a tree, and grow it to trillions and trillions of organisms," he says. He can use the mixture to either make a fertile tea to spray on his plants, or spread it at their roots.

DeWitt believes that farming is a form of service. "Getting healthy food that's been picked at its ripest with the most dense flavor and nutrition into people's homes and into their bodies is a service," he says. "To that end, Dave's Greens is all about diversity. "We grow 26 varieties of tomatoes because nature doesn't want mono-cropping," DeWitt says. He grows primarily heirloom tomatoes including Striped German, Carbon, Evergreen, Paul Robeson, Green Zebra, Pink Berkeley Tie Dye and Cherokee Greens, as well as farm stand standards like eggplant, cucumber, peppers, garlic, Swiss chard and kale, again, all leaning toward heirlooms.

"Heirlooms have been passed on for flavor and color, not shipping," DeWitt says. "They're grown to deliver to the customer that day. And with heirlooms you can save the seeds to plant because they haven't been hybridized." His green mix contains 20 to 30 varieties of greens, including five or six kinds of lettuce, two or three varieties of arugula, and two to five varieties of sorrel, bok choy and mustard greens. The



Dave DeWitt makes a tea out of organic materials, which he sprays on his crops at Dave's Greens in Truro.

Because of the small size of her farm, Andreola is able to move her oysters around constantly, something she can do more easily than what can be done on larger grants. It's the "small is beautiful" approach to the world that somehow got left behind in the seventies. "Each time I go out I'm sorting by size, giving the smaller oysters a better chance to grow," she said, "I clean barnacles and algae from the cages that compete for food and impede the flow of water." Left to its own devices, an oyster would grow as flat as a perfect skipping stone, and increased handling causes the edges of the shells of the growing oysters to chip away, causing the shell to form a deep cup, something that chefs and restaurants look for.

Andreola and Leonhardt work the grant, seemingly in their own thoughts even when next to each other. Over the course of a few hours, they rarely speak. Before they go out they've worked out the specific jobs they each have to do.

"It calms me down," Andreola says about working Mant's Landing Oysters. "It makes me happy. I've always liked being near the ocean. I was a Jersey shore kid growing up and being by the ocean gives you a certain perspective. It doesn't matter how bad the day is, it's like meditating or yoga and that probably affects the way I farm. I feel I'm in my proper place in nature, and for that reason I probably farm more slowly and meticulously than other farmers.

"I have an Italian heritage, which means I have a heritage surrounding food," she continues. "The preparation, the sitting down and eating, is important to me. One of my earliest memories is going into my grandmother's garden with a salt shaker and eating tomatoes. I guess it's the reason I grow oysters today."





Nauset Regional High School senior Kieran Norton and his sister Elizabeth harvesting razor clams at Crosby Landing Beach in Brewster.

farm's manager, Uli Winslow, grows a variety of mushrooms for which he, too, makes his own growing medium.

You can find Dave's Greens at the weekly farmers' markets in Truro, Wellfleet and Provincetown, where they also sell CSAs, and at some of the finest restaurants on the Outer Cape including Blackfish and its Crush Pad food truck, Terra Luna, High Tide Kitchen food truck, all in Truro, Spindler's in Provincetown, Ceraldi in Wellfleet and Mac's Seafood across the Cape.

### **Kieran Norton, Razor Clam Harvester**

Razor clams are an enigma in the shellfish family, but that may change soon. They are delicious; their meat is described as sweet, their texture is firm and they present very well on a plate. And like all clams, they are versatile in that they can be eaten both cooked and raw, enhancing a wide range of cooking styles from Asian to Italian. Still, try to find them, not just in a market or a local restaurant, but try to find them in the sand. They are the most mobile of shellfish, with not only incredible digging abilities, but they can swim, too. A large bed of razor clams may be present on a beach one year, and the next year the beach could be completely devoid of them, the clams having packed up and moved on. It's one of the reason they aren't farmed. You've heard the expression about herding cats? You could say that about farm-raising razor clams. You have to admire the spirited little bivalves.

Those are just some of the reasons the demand for razor clams hasn't taken off, said Chris Sherman, president of Island Creek Oysters, who also runs the non-profit Island Creek Oysters Foundation and serves as president of the Massachusetts Aquaculture Association. "The

market is dependent on the big tides," he says. "You have stretches of time when they're not available, and all of sudden they are available, so you have a large amount of clams harvested in a short time and the market is small, and can't absorb all the clams."

The best thing that could happen to razor clams, Sherman said, is what happened to oysters: more oysters. Having a consistent supply and presence on menus are the ways to build a market for them.

But it's low tide on the new moon at Crosby Landing Beach, in Brewster. The water in the bay is out—way out, on a negative tide. This is the optimum time to harvest razor clams, when the beach is most uncovered. For all the world, it looks as if 17-year-old Kieran Norton and his 14-year-old sister, Elizabeth, are playing an aquatic version of the favorite carnival game, Whack-a-Mole. Kieran squirts a saltwater solution into a hole shaped like a keyhole, and up pops a razor clam. Elizabeth, following, snatches the clam before it can retreat back in its hole. This is how you harvest razor clams on Cape Cod.

The senior at Nauset Regional High School, who also tends 50 lobster traps with friends, has taken advantage of a pilot program in Brewster to get his commercial license to harvest razor clams. Elizabeth works as his apprentice. "I have a student razor clamming license," she explains, because she's just old enough to work legally in Brewster. She likes being out with her brother, and "...it's not something an average 14-year-old girl would be doing at five a.m.," she says.

Both Nortons are Brewster-born and raised, and have turned to the age-old tradition on the Cape of harvesting from the sea when you're young and looking for ways to earn some money and don't want to deal with the tourists. "It's not a conventional way to grow up," said the elder Norton. "I know people who want to get off Cape Cod when





Tyler Daley, owner of the lobster boat *Dorothea Isabel*, and his deckhand Julian Escobar, checking on some of the 800 traps they tend. Easily two-thirds of what they catch will get tossed back into the bay, because the lobster is female or undersized.

they graduate high school, but our family takes advantage of living on the Cape.”

Kieran was attracted to razor clamming because of the abundance of razor clams in Brewster, and because harvesting them has an easy entry. “It’s not very labor-intensive,” he says. “There is a learning curve; you have to learn what holes to spray.” You basically need a sprayer filled with super saturated saltwater, about two pounds of salt to two gallons of water, to squirt into a razor clam hole and force the clam out. “Harvesting is dependent on the tide,” he explains, noting that tides permit seven to ten days at the most per month to harvest. His best day’s catch was 110 pounds, and with luck he’s brought in as much as 450 pounds in a week.

Kieran, while acknowledging that razor clams for the longest time were the least desirable of shellfish, doesn’t quite understand why. “I’ve eaten them raw, steamed, in chowder and Asian-style with soy sauce and herbs,” he said, adding that harvesters would like to see a local demand.

### Tyler Daley, Daley Fisheries

It’s 10 a.m. and the lobster boat, *Dorothea Isabel*, is steaming northward out of Sesuit Harbor in Dennis against a steady chop and headwind. Normally, Tyler Daley, the boat’s owner, would already have been on the bay six hours earlier, but weather kept him in. But conditions should break in a few hours and until then the two- to two-and-a-half foot waves will just be an annoyance when harvesting begins.

The *Dorothea Isabel*, named after Daley’s grandmother, is a 35-foot, bare-bones, floating platform built for fishing. There are two things you notice immediately when you step aboard. The first is the smell, an overpowering mix of diesel fumes combined with the stench wafting from the approximately 400 pounds of a secret blend of putrefying fish used for bait. You do get used to it, though. The second thing is that there is no head; no place to answer nature’s call. You pray you won’t have to get used to that, too.

The first half-hour or so is the only time Daley and his deckhand, Julian Escobar, have even a modicum of downtime. Daley steers the boat while Escobar readies the deck for harvesting: securing bins and coolers that will hold the catch, transferring bait and readying bait bags that will be placed in the traps, each holding a handful of the slop that’s a gourmet treat for lobsters. Escobar is a chef and has worked in some of the finest restaurants including Clio and Bricco in Boston, 5 Corners Kitchen in Marblehead, and the Woodstock Inn in Vermont. But today, like many Cape Codders, he’s doing what he has to do to make ends meet. He likes lobster fishing though. “It was scary at first,” he says. “But eventually it gave me such a sense of life. You have to constantly be aware to take care of yourself when you’re on the boat.” Daley’s concentration, too, is unflagging as he monitors the boat, charts his course, and plans the workday. “I try not to let my mind wander, otherwise I’d end up screwing something up,” he says. “I have to make sure I stay with the program and Julian is safe.” The Brewster native has been fishing for lobster for more than 20 years, since he was 12 and had 25 traps of his own. Now, after a few stints fishing for lobster offshore for others ending in 2012, he owns the



*Dorothea Isabel* outright and tends 800 traps, the maximum amount allowed, plus an acre grant for oysters.

Five miles out of Sesuit Harbor, Daley signals that the real work is about to begin. He ties on an apron and flicks on the hard rock that will blare over the sound system, adding for the rest of the day to the cacophony made from the deep throbbing of the engine and the high-pitched whining of the winch. After using a combination of old-school LORAN and GPS on his phone to find his traps, Daley maneuvers the boat to hook a buoy that marks one end of a trawl—a 2000-foot line that sits on the bottom of the bay with 16 traps connected to it at intervals. Daley then connects the trawl to the electric winch, and as the traps appear in the first few feet of green, luminous water, he hoists them dripping onto the boat's rail, flicks open the trap's door and empties out the lobsters.

At the same time, Escobar removes the old bait and rebaits the trap. All this takes seconds. As Daley winches up another trap, Escobar grabs the first trap, drags it one-handed along the rail, and stacks it on the boat's stern deck. Each trap weighs anywhere from 45 to 65 pounds, and because this is a short day, the crew of the *Dorothea Isabel* will check only about 250 of the 800 traps Daley tends. After all 16 traps have been emptied and stacked, Daley throttles up the boat and Escobar positions each trap at the stern, being mindful not to get his feet caught in all the lines that are uncoiling overboard as each trap slips into the boat's wake and back to the bottom of the bay.

Haul up, clean out, rebait, stack. Fishing for lobster is hard, rote, monotonous work, repeated over and over for hours, and Daley and Escobar work in tandem without words, as if they've become parts of the pitching *Dorothea Isabel*. They say fishing is the most optimistic pursuit a person can do. You cast a fetid piece of bait into all of that water in hopes of a retrieving a fish to eat or sell. A few of the trawls were all but empty, and Daley repositioned those somewhere else along the bottom, playing cat and mouse with an enormous, crawling pod of lobster he knows is down there somewhere. In the interest of sustainability, easily two-thirds of what Daley catches this day will get tossed back into the bay. The lobster might be a female, the eggs covering her underside looking like coffee grounds, or either too small or surprisingly too big—lobsters mate front to front, and large, egg-bearing females need a similar sized fertile male to procreate. A Chihuahua/Great Dane mix isn't in the crustaceans' cards.

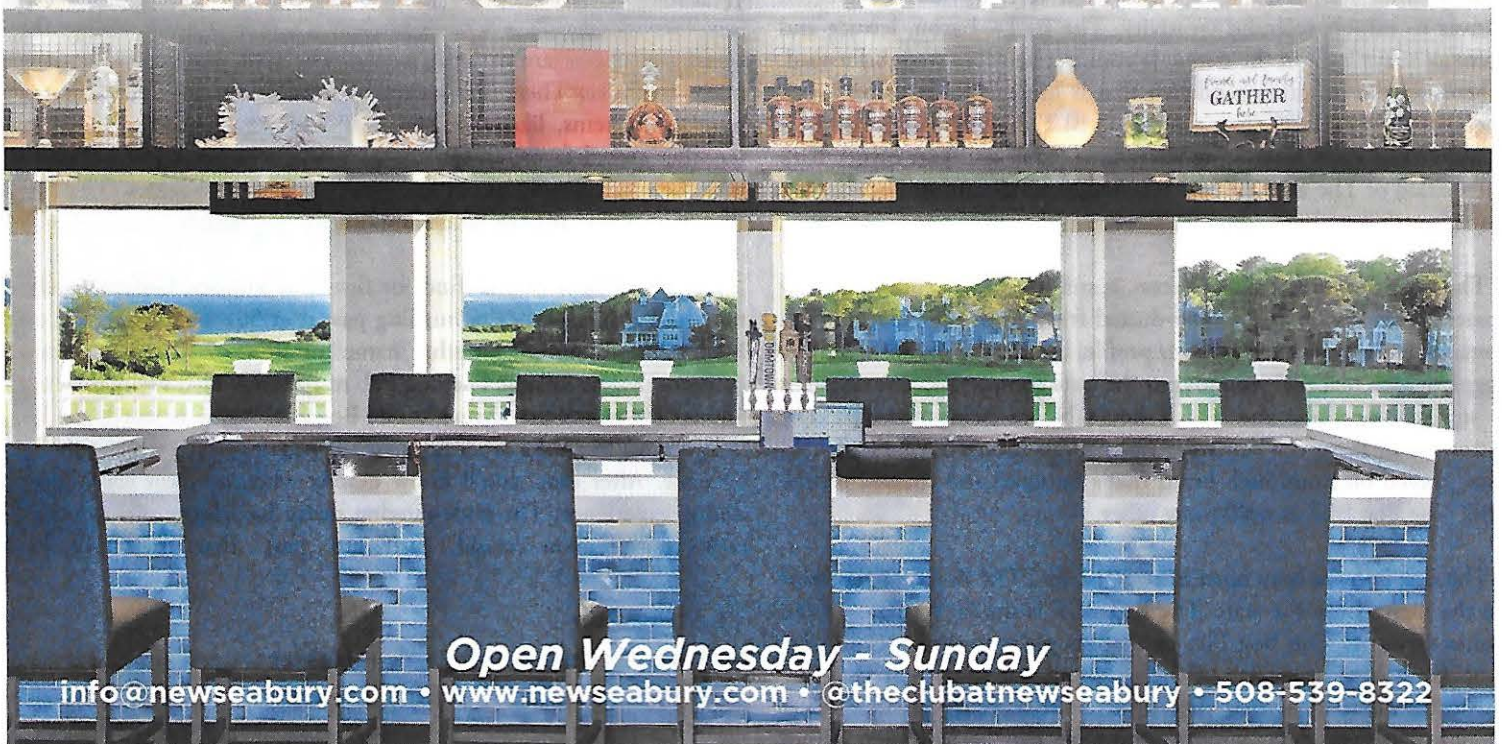
The work may be hard and monotonous, but it's the hunt that continues to thrill Daley. "It's boring when you're not catching them, but it's what you keep trying for and it keeps you coming back," he says. "I wouldn't want to be doing anything else."



John Greiner-Ferris is a fine arts photographer, writer, and theater maker. For years he worked as a corporate and freelance photographer/writer.



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