

More Than an Oyster Bar

Rappahannock

[BY ANNE SHULER TOOLE]

Walk inside Rappahannock Oyster Bar in the Cigar Factory downtown and you will find much more than an oyster bar. Yes, there is a beautiful copper bar — one of Charleston’s largest — and every style of oyster you can imagine, but it’s also a restaurant featuring in-season, fresh-from-the-boat fish and shellfish along with non-seafood options and a great brunch. Not to mention it’s an active fish market; inventory is sold to the public so that chef Kevin Kelly and his team can keep their stock as fresh as possible. With a back story like Rappahannock’s, it’s no wonder that they are so dedicated to serving only the best local, sustainably harvested seafood.

The story of Rappahannock Oyster Bar started back in 1899 when the great-grandfather of cousins Ryan and Travis Croxton secured a lease for 2 acres of river bottom in Virginia’s Rappahannock River. He started an oystering business during what they described as an oyster “gold rush.” His company was successful for a time, picking up customers like Campbell’s Soup and growing the lease to over 200 acres of oyster beds, but, unfortunately, the harvesting techniques of the era and the exploitation of the Bay oyster yielded a bleak future for those in the industry. The family business lasted for two generations, but the third generation (Ryan and Travis’ fathers) was discouraged from going into it. Around the time Ryan and Travis were young children, their grandfather was winding down the business.

By 2001, the Bay oyster was close to becoming an endangered species and was estimated to be at just 1% of what it had been in its heyday. When the 200-plus acre lease was up for expiration that year, the fourth generation — with no equipment or experience except for some foggy childhood memories of their grandfather’s profession — decided to renew and pursue a new hobby of sorts. They had no expectations for success and never anticipated that



Chef Kevin Kelly.

the renewal would be the first step to saving an industry and rocketing them into the national culinary spotlight.

“It started off as a hobby, almost like a backyard garden. And because we didn’t have the know-how, we did a lot of Googling,” smiled Ryan. “There’s a lot to be said about having a break from an old tradition because

you can put fresh eyes on it. We weren't burdened by inherited equipment or processes that we were familiar with. What we did have was a competitive advantage to design a solution that was right for the time and for the region."

Through research, trial and error — and with insight from other oyster farmers in the area — the Croxton cousins refined their growing, sorting, breeding and density processes and, ultimately, became one of the first commercially successful aquaculture businesses in the Chesapeake area.

The rest is history, as they say. The cousins have been honored with the *Food & Wine* Tastemaker Award and were listed on *Southern Living's* 50 People Who Are Changing the South. They resurrected a species of oyster in under a decade and helped Virginia become



Left to right: Owners Travis and Ryan Croxton.

a leader in oyster production. Eventually, their success in oyster retail led them to starting their own brand of restaurants, each one carefully tailored to celebrate the sustainable and local seafood that is done "right" in their respective regions.

Which brings us back to Charleston. "Chef Kelly's menu is top of the line. We started with oysters, but it's so much more than that — like the snowy grouper that he got off the dock from a local fisherman, or Geechee Boy grits," Travis explained. "Everything on the menu has a story and a place and a season. We actually limit the Rappahannock products in Charleston because there are other local options that are

done well. This is some of the best food in the city for a reason." 🌴

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