

THE SHUCKIN' TRUCK

From Farm to Fender

by **Carol McCarthy**

Photographs by **Angel Tucker**

On a blazing July night at Narragansett Town Beach, The Shuckin' Truck stands out among the wheeled vendors selling pizza, hot dogs, and vegan treats—and not only because of its striking mural of Point Judith Lighthouse.

Within minutes of rolling in, the mobile purveyor of fresh seafood boasts a quick-moving line of barefoot, sunburned customers that is several deep. “Number 11,” calls the young woman at the serving window, handing over lobster tacos with diced mango and avocado dressing. Seated on sandy blankets, in lawn chairs, or the back of pickup trucks, customers devour the locally sourced selections.

Dave Roebuck, owner of the Salt Pond Oyster Company on Point Judith Pond, opened the Shuckin' Truck in 2011 with the motto “from farm to fender,” filling the fresh-from-the-oyster-bed niche in the food truck craze. “I had never seen one [a raw bar food truck] before,” Roebuck says of his decision to plunge into the business.

Every Monday and Wednesday night during the summer, you will find Roebuck at the beach, shucking oysters and littlenecks nonstop at an ice-filled table alongside longtime employee Alvaro Badzan.

This night begins fortuitously. Not long into his shucking shift, Roebuck exclaims to his daughter Riley, age 7: “Look what I just found. A pearl. How cool is that? In five years I’ve found only two,” he says, presenting the tiny gem to Riley, who soon loses it in the parking lot.



Dave Roebuck's Salt Pond Oyster Company provides oysters to his other business, the Shuckin' Truck.





No matter. The true treasure here is the shellfish, which is as fresh as you can get. Roebuck harvested the oysters he is shucking that very morning, hoisting them onto his aluminum barge from their beds on the pond bottom.

As soon as the truck arrives, regular customers stream over. “Every week, a dozen little necks,” Roebuck says as a familiar face arrives at the raw bar. The littlenecks come from another shellfish farmer’s bounty on Point Judith Pond, the long body of water at the mouth of Narragansett Bay that divides the villages of Galilee in Narragansett and Jerusalem in South Kingstown.

Wei Da of South Kingstown is another regular. His mom is visiting from China, and he brings her every week. “She loves the oysters. They are so fresh,” he says. “You can’t eat raw seafood in China because of the water [which is polluted].”

The eastern oysters Roebuck grows are brawny and briny, with 32 percent salinity. Eating one is like a savory dive in the ocean. He sells three-quarters of a million oysters a year to customers from Washington, D.C., to Montreal.

“Number 34,” calls the server as customers scan the truck’s chalkboard menus, which offer tacos—made with

Northern Atlantic cod, lobster or scallops—littlenecks, and oysters.

Nearby, Roebuck’s family—including wife, Kristin, three children, dad, uncle, mother-in-law, and brother—gathers in a circle of chairs for a Shuckin’ Truck dinner. “I have a lot of family support,” he says.

In fact, his brother Chris’s boats supply the scallops he serves. Fishing and seafood run deep in Roebuck’s blood. His dad and uncle are longtime fishermen who live next door to each other on a dock in Snug Harbor, where Roebuck grew up lobstering with his dad and later worked as a squid fisher-



man. He launched the Salt Pond Oyster Company in 2002 so he could work on the water and be home at night with his family.

Roebuck uses an upwelling system for oyster farming. His approach takes longer but allows him to offer oysters in three sizes to meet customers' demands. "I do free planting on the [pond] bottom. It gives them extra time to grow," he says. The smaller ones take two years; the larger ones—palm sized—take four. Roebuck harvests every week by bullrake, hauling 5,000 to 6,000 oysters each time, even in winter. He hasn't missed a week in years.

Raising these beauties requires constant labor. At 7:30 on a sparkling summer morning, Badzan is at the dockside nursery upwelling bins, using a hose to flush out oyster waste, an endless but necessary task. "They need to be cleaned, or they can almost suffocate," Roebuck says.

The bins hold 20 million baby oysters, which sit on screens along the bottom, feeding on plankton delivered by the tides. A paddle wheel flushes the water 24 hours a day. Over the course of a few months, the oysters will grow from 1 millimeter (about 1/32 of an inch) to an inch and a half, he says.

Roebuck then moves the oysters to racks holding screen-like bags—which keep out hungry crabs—at the Matunuck Oyster Farm. After more than a year, Roebuck transfers the oysters to the pond, where they grow freely on 22 acres he leases from the state of Rhode Island. This work keeps him and a handful of employees busy year round. "You have to sort them by size in the nursery or the big ones will hog the food. "The biggest challenge is getting



a high percentage of the babies out of the upwellers [nursery]. It takes constant grading and cleaning," Roebuck says.

The food truck business has its own challenges: creating a menu, knowing how much food to bring, preparing it quickly, working long hours. On this July day, Roebuck was on the water at

7:30 a.m. and will work until 10:30 p.m.

Well into the dinner rush at the beach, things move briskly. "Number 64," the server calls. Meanwhile, Roebuck restocks the raw bar and keeps shucking those sought-after gems from the sea.