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Raw Ambition

Skip Bennett made his Duxbury oysters the must-have ingredient for the nation's top chefs. As a new Kenmore Square restaurant proves, that was just his first course.

by **ALEXANDRA HALL** • 10/26/2010, 9:30 a.m.

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From left, the partners behind Island Creek Oyster Bar: Jeremy Sewall, Skip Bennett, and Garrett Harker. Photo by Matt Kalinowski

The cluster of tents at the Island Creek Oyster Festival is glowing magenta under Duxbury Beach's swath of inky sky. For five hours now, wine, beer, and vodka have been flowing — sometimes literally — all over the sand dunes that double as a floor tonight. The VIP tent is five chefs' jackets deep, with a couple dozen of Boston's heavyweight cooks doling out delicacies. Rialto's Jody Adams is plating razor-clam chowder and rabbit hoagies for the festival's hordes; Craigie on Main's Tony Maws is arranging pork-belly skewers; Blue Ginger's Ming Tsai is passing mignonette-splashed oysters and posing for photos with two sycophantic young shuckers. And moving among all of them—a tanned, grinning blur between the makeshift stoves and luminous green-tableclothed high-tops—is Skip Bennett.

Bennett is a farmer and a businessman, in that order. He's the reason this dream team of chefs has descended onto a quiet, out-of-the-way town on the cusp of the South Shore. He's the man who owns and operates Island Creek Oysters, the Duxbury oyster farm that, in this era of obsessive food sourcing, supplies the "It" ingredient on menus at many of the best restaurants in the country — Providence in Los Angeles, Per Se and Le Bernardin in New York, the Little Nell in Aspen. And the festival he's throwing here tonight doesn't just spotlight those relationships — it also helps buoy them.

"People love him for good reason," says Seth Raynor, dabbing bright green sauce on a just-shucked specimen. Raynor serves hundreds of Island Creek oysters a day at each of his three Nantucket restaurants. "These are the best," he remarks as he slurps one back. "They're meaty, briny, and have a deep cup with a perfect hinge." From five feet away, Tsai (who also keeps Bennett's oysters on his menu) chimes in: "I went through 900 Island Creeks tonight, and not one of them was off."

Quality, though, is hardly the only force behind the kind of response seen here tonight. The other is Bennett himself. He's a collision of guerrilla-marketing acumen, agro-cred, aggressive networking, and party-boy charisma. "Island Creek pushes oysters like Nike sells sneakers," says Sel de la Torre's Louis DiBiccarri. "It's the coolest-aid-on-the-block syndrome — they've got an excellent product, and they're also the beach bums everyone wants to have a beer with."

Foodsemakers, from national distributors down to family-business cheesemakers and farmers like Bennett, are supposed to sluck up to bigtime restaurateurs to get business. That's not the way Skip Bennett plays it; if anything, he seems to have the entire food industry eating out of his hand.

And that's not the only dynamic he's changing. At most restaurants, menus are supposed to dictate the ingredients, not the other way around. Bennett and his new partners, restaurateur Garrett Harker and chef Jeremy Sewall, are turning that conventional wisdom on its head as they present Boston with their new restaurant concept: the Island Creek Oyster Bar.

The Kenmore Square spot one-ups the concept of farm-to-table eating by literally bringing the farm itself to the table. Raw-bar-centric restaurants may not be new, but ICOB is one of the first to rely so heavily on one specialty product. Imagine if Niman Ranch opened a steakhouse. Or if Aunt Jemima opened a pancake house. Through dedication, ferocious attention to detail, and marketing know-how, Skip Bennett has created a must-have brand of oysters that is virtually inseparable from himself, and vice versa.

Sausage and laws. The two things, so the saying goes, that you don't ever want to see being made. Go ahead and add restaurants to the list. As proof, just consider the space that this past summer was supposed to have been ICOB, but on a sweltering day at the end of August was still just a sawdust-covered construction site that used to be Great Bay, another ambitious seafood eatery in the Hotel Commonwealth. Walking through the doors of the restaurant in progress, you entered a hive of adrenaline-fueled activity. In the previous two weeks, general manager Tom Schlesinger-Guidelli had interviewed no fewer than 30 people ready to do everything from fileting flounder to busing tables to pouring a perfect dry martini. Over the next two weeks, he and the team would sit down with 220 more candidates, embarking on a flurry of 55 new hires. Meanwhile, he was having trouble writing down all the names. His fingers were exhausted from a little décor side project: setting thousands of oysters on their side and into oyster cages. Eventually, 37 cages — each of which holds several thousand oysters — would line the back wall of the restaurant, illuminated from underneath by dramatic lighting. The ultimate effect: a shadowy mosaic that's both postmodern Escher-esque cool and a not-so-subtle suggestion of Island Creek's Duxbury oyster farm itself.

In fact, the entire dining room, executed by design-world darling Peter Bentel, echoes the farm. The reclaimed wood of the wainscoting evokes weathered gray shingles; galvanized steel mimics the pails; and the wooden front of the bar brings to mind Powder Point Bridge, which stretches across the bay where Bennett tends his oyster beds. Said bar, split between cocktails and oysters, will take up about 40 percent of the place — a high-energy nexus where shuckers will dispense not just food, but also education. "Know your grower" is my motto," explains Bennett. "We want to make this place as much about that as eating."

To that end, every one of Schlesinger-Guidelli's hires will be required to spend at least a day farming oysters at Island Creek's spot on Duxbury Bay, so they'll be able to roll out facts and figures about oyster farming to diners and also describe the farming process from direct personal experience.

Of course, not everyone wants to hear what they have to say. This is Kenmore Square, after all, and odds are that Fenway-goers in for fish and chips and a pregame beer won't have the same yearning for bivalve esoterica as the dedicated locavore sitting next to them at the bar. That essentially means running two restaurants under one roof, and training the staff to operate in both is a task that falls to Harker. "You've got to have a sixth sense about reading people," he explains. "How much do they want to interact with you, or to learn about what you're serving versus how much they want to take their meal on its own terms."

That's a challenge for any restaurant, as Harker knows well enough — he's been a force behind eateries such as No. 9 Park, the Butcher Shop, and his own Eastern Standard, which sits next door to ICOB. But when you're working with a restaurant where the directive is to educate people about a specialty product, it's an even finer line. "As much as it's our responsibility to make sure the staff knows everything they possibly can about Island Creek," he says, "we also need to teach them to know when to hang back with that information, too."

Some of that balance will come from the dining room area beyond the bar, which is more subdued and slightly more formal than the restaurant's up-front space, with booth and banquet seating beneath Schlesinger-Guidelli's oyster crates. Making all of it work together has required some fairly epic negotiations among the three partners and their respective teams. "Nothing this new gets made without road bumps," Harker says. "You get three big egos — representing three successfully run businesses — in one room, and of course you're not always going to agree."

And back in August, there was also that little issue of opening the restaurant by the new deadline, which was eventually changed to late fall. "We'd all agreed on one thing: that we were going to open when we were ready, and not before," he says. "There had been so many moving parts, from the evolution of Kenmore Square to Jeremy's responsibilities at Lineage, all of which had to fall into place. You couldn't honor that complexity by just picking a date. We all care very deeply about our specialties — that's where we overlap. For Jeremy, that's cooking. For me, that's hospitality."

And of course, for Bennett, that's oysters.

As work environments go, Bennett's is tough to beat — at least on gloriously sunny days like this one. In lieu of a desk, he mans a noisy skiff. His "suit" includes jeans and flip-flops. His view? The sparkling waters of Duxbury Bay, stretching out in three directions. Rather than visit staffers at their cubicles, he boats out to them — usually at top speed — on the floating docks where most of the farming gets done.

This is where Bennett grew up, where he caught lobsters with his father, who still fishes the bay. It's where he came back to after getting a finance degree in college, and where he grew his first batch of quahog clams before trying his hand at oysters in the mid-'90s. "I just got a taste of working on the water and couldn't let go," he says. He dug in hard, reading everything out there about oyster farming.

At first, he sold the oysters he grew to wholesalers — but then, the bivalves were a rarity on most restaurant menus. Then 9/11 hit, and the wholesalers scaled back on luxury foods. "Suddenly, they just weren't buying any oysters," says Bennett. "That's when I realized it was still important to chefs to know where their oysters were coming from, and I started going directly to them. I started talking to them about every last little thing we do here on the farm."

One of those chefs was Sandy Ingber, head of the Oyster Bar in Grand Central Terminal, one of the first restaurants to celebrate and sell oysters from all over the country. "I sent him a shipment and then called him up," recalls Bennett. "He was really gruff, and said, 'I tried 'em. I friggin' love 'em. What do you call 'em? You need a name.' Well, Island Creek was the part of town I grew up in, so we went with that. And thank God we did, because that's what pushed the brand into the marketplace."

Another early supporter was Jeremy Sewall, a longtime New Englander and all-around seafood fanatic who grew up fishing in Maine. He was one of the first chefs ever to visit Island Creek. "Ten years ago in Boston, only a handful of restaurants had oysters," he says. "Now they're everywhere, from pubs, where you can have them with a pint of Guinness, to fancier spots like No. 9 Park and L'Espalier. There's something great about that. And Skip and his team have had a lot to do with it."

Today a team of 10 is out on the "Oysterplex" — a shack anchored several thousand acres into the bay. It's an all-purpose oyster clearing-house, bobbing like a miniature Scandinavian oil rig, where every last bivalve gets culled (sorted by size). A typical day's load is about 100 bags. Staffers pull out any oysters that measure three inches or more — the state requirement for sale. Those that are two and a half inches (a.k.a. "selects") will be shipped outside the Bay State to chefs who like their signature size and shape — Thomas Keller at Per Se and French Laundry, for example. ("He prefers them for presentation purposes," says Bennett.) That shape — not too long, with a deep cup — has become part of the farm's brand; chefs prize the consistency that comes from the precise farming methods employed by Island Creek workers.

Each May, the farm receives several packets of oyster seeds, tiny grains of dust that arrive weighing two pounds per packet. Eighteen months later, the oysters from each packet will weigh 200,000 pounds, cover one acre of ocean, and be ready to harvest.

"These guys are growing like mad," says Bennett, looking down into one of the upwellers, where the baby oysters start off.

There, they're washed every day and graded for size once or twice a week; when large enough, they're put into bags to grow out in the bay. "You have to rotate them out constantly," says Bennett. "If you leave [the growing oyster] in too long, you get a long, thin cup. Because it's reaching up to get algae to eat, kind of like a tomato plant that gets leggy because it's reaching up for the sun."

One of Bennett's favorite terms to throw around is "merroir" — *mer* married with *terroir*. "It's like a cabernet grown in Napa," he says, his brown hair waving in the breeze. "The geography determines what it ultimately tastes like. And it's the same here. The ocean environment creates the taste."

"Every element here adds a flavor profile. The salinity, the temperature, to some degree the water flow, and definitely the plankton. The plankton here are different than in Wellfleet or Long Island. And the difference they make in how the oysters taste is what we can really highlight at the new restaurant," Bennett says with pride.

He is as quick with producing concepts like the aforementioned "merroir" as he is with producing oysters, and together, the two have proven a winning strategy thus far. He essentially created the Island Creek brand via viral marketing — in part by working the party circuit. Hard.

"We quickly discovered how important it was to be present at, and shuck at, events," he says. "We just never said no to anyone." These days, it seems like a rare party that the Island Creek crew isn't at, seemingly having the most fun of anyone in the room. Further raising the farm's profile, Bennett hired former lifestyle writer (and onetime *Boston* magazine staffer) Erin Byers Murray; she spent a year working on the farm and writing a book — and a blog — about the experience. But most of all, Bennett knocked on chefs' doors, hung out with plenty of them, and built relationships. That outreach has resulted in a formidable international network of chefs and restaurateurs who sell and support Island Creek Oysters.

Back in ICOB, Jeremy Sewall is cooing over his newly installed deep fryer. "Look at this," he says, picking up a tons with it. Fried oysters are a crossover food, one capable of keeping the game-day crowds as happy as the foodie contingent. But oysters alone won't be enough to set ICOB apart from every other restaurant in town with a raw bar. "There's a very good reason why we partnered up with an aquaculturist on this," says Sewall. "It's because of his passion. Skip's going to grow stuff for us, and provide that direct connection to the fish and the product we're after."

Bennett, meanwhile, sounds more like the director of a competition than one of its participants. "I always say a rising tide helps float all boats," he says. "We supply Jasper White's Summer Shack and B&G Oysters alike. That kind of co-branding will continue. And the end result will be that people will eat more oysters."

Of course, his penchant for fun — the festivals, the parties, and his ability to talk to anyone about just about anything — doesn't earn him many enemies, either. "It's true," he says, smiling. "We do a lot of things to have a good time."

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