

Q: [0:00] And if we could just begin with how you like to introduce yourself.

A: [0:05] Yeah, cool. Well, hi there. My name is Libby Davis. I'm the owner, operator, and founder of Lady Shuckers, mobile raw bar and event company. It's a food truck and event catering company based out of Portland, Maine that sources from women-owned sea farms.

Q: [0:20] Great. And can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up?

A: [0:25] Yes, so I'm a Maine native. I grew up in Scarborough, born and raised about 10 minutes south of Portland. And yeah, I grew up in my neighborhood. It was like on a salt marsh, the Nonesuch River.

And so, yeah, growing up – I actually really didn't like seafood growing up, but my family did. And my mom and her friends would always cook lobsters. And my dad would always get a recreational clamming license and go down the end of the street. And we'd dig for clams. And yeah, even with the neighborhood kids, we'd go down there and find treasures in the marsh and bring them back, broken bottles and stuff.

But it's really funny to all my family now that I work in the seafood sector because I actually didn't care for it much as a kid. Like the smell, I just didn't really like it.

Q: [1:07] Great. And can you tell me where your parents are from and what they did?

A: [1:11] Yeah, so my mother, she's from outside of Boston, the North Shore in Revere, Massachusetts. And yeah, she's an account manager. Works for like a gourmet food international company. She's an account manager for like Hannaford, like works on getting specialty cheeses and meats, deli products into their stores.

So I've kind of always had that food industry-adjacent sector growing up. She would go to shows and bring home samples and stuff. We'd always be trying stuff.

And then, yeah, my father is – has been self-employed my whole life. He's a residential, remodeling contractor and works primarily doing basements, kitchens, bathroom, remodels, not so much additions anymore. But yeah, mostly in the greater Portland area.

Q: [2:00] Great. And do you have any siblings?

A: [2:01] I do not. Just me myself and I, yeah.

Q: [2:04] And do you have any history of fishing in your family?

A: [2:08] Well, so my dad grew up on Peaks Island. And he used to lobster a lot as a young man. Not really so much commercial fishing. We would go on like bass

fishing trips and stuff like that, but not really any like deep sea-like fishing of that sort.

But definitely the sea is in his side of the family's blood. And it's in my blood too. And that's actually where him and my mom met was on Peaks Island, when she finally moved up here. They met at the Dry Dock bar right on Commercial Street. They're not together anymore, but they have a great relationship. (laughter)

Q: [2:47] Great. Thank you. And do you have any family history of working in other roles in the fishing industry? So maybe that could be bookkeeping, processing, marketing. Anything like that?

A: [3:00] I don't know so much in the fishing industry, but I have like a lot of agricultural experience. I studied biology in school. I went to this small hippie school in Vermont and wanted to pursue like wildlife biology. And then kind of learning about the synergy between wildlife and humans.

I actually decided to go into the Peace Corps. And I served for three years in Madagascar as an agriculture food security volunteer. And Madagascar is a beautiful island off the coast of Africa. And a lot of the villages I worked in and the villages I lived in were fishing villages.

And basically what we were doing there was trying to grow new crops. Trying to teach about sustainability. Trying to teach about co-op and organizational structure. About how folks could have some financial resiliency. And about how they could kind of diversify the supply chain and get those products into other markets. Because it's very kind of remote place to try and do business in. Pretty much all the business that was being done in a very rural place like Madagascar was agribusiness.

So yeah, that was a very formative experience for me. It's funny that it's like doing what I do now, working with oyster farmers, that that experience maybe kind of set the stage for what I do now a little bit.

Q: [4:23] Awesome. Are you married?

A: [4:27] Not married. No.

Q: [4:29] Do you have any children?

A: [4:31] No children.

Q: [4:31] Great. So we're going to transition to your role in the sector, starting with how would you describe your role in the fishing or aquaculture industry in Maine?

A: [4:42] Yeah. I feel like I wear many hats in the aquaculture sector in Maine. It

kind of came about in this really like kismet an organic way where I came back from Peace Corps. I served there 2015 to 2018 and I got right into working at a raw bar when I came back..

I didn't really know what I was going to do with my life after such like a transformative experience there. I felt kind of like a stranger in my home turf a little bit.

And yeah, I met an individual who had just opened up this oyster bar in town. The oyster bar's called Maine Oyster Company and the individual's name is John Herrigel, who's the owner-operator.

And I started managing that oyster bar and I just kind of fell in love with the product. I fell in love with like the sustainability story of it. I love to tell like oysters were good for human health and environmental health.

And yeah, at the time the bar that I was working in, I was the only female identifying staff member there. And I was running drinks and doing food and all this stuff. But I really wanted to be shucking because I could see that that interface between the shucker and the patron. Like that was where the really cool information exchange was happening about oyster farming, about oyster reproductive style, about the flavor profile, about the growing.

So I was really dedicated and driven to kind of get my shucking skills up so that I can be in that kind of facilitator role to educate more about sustainable aquaculture to folks.

And I worked that job for a long time. I met a lot of amazing people that it was kind of like an oyster clubhouse where farmers would come in. And yeah, I forged a lot of great friendships with women and other men in the industry as well who are farmers, or outreach specialists, or just tied to policy, marine policy in different ways, and all working to kind of raise the aquaculture industry. And unfortunately, we had this global pandemic which closed the restaurant temporarily.

And I transitioned back into international development work for a little bit. Working for a carbon – a project developer that was doing like carbon offset credits back in Sub-Saharan Africa.

But I really just missed aquaculture so much in the community. You know, I was working from home. I felt kind of isolated. And I just wanted so badly to make an impact on the industry. And I wanted to support these people that had become like such good friends of mine.

And so I got, yeah, this little think tank of friends together. The Lady Shuckers Think Tank. And we started putting some ideas down on paper, some calls about what it would be like to have this food truck. You know? It was kind of my kind

of original concept. Lady Shuckers and kind of doing it for ladies and just for underrepresented groups in general to try and amplify those voices and to tell those stories. And really get the products into other markets and wider audiences.

So yeah, 2021 kind of soft launched the company. And I think my role – it's a marketer. It's a marketer to tell the story of the farmers that I buy from who are out on the water. It's kind of hard for them to always get into the public eye because they're very busy with their farms. So I feel like I kind of have this really – I'm honored to have the role of being like a steward of their products and a caretaker of their products. And get to bring them to people and help people experience them through a bunch of different types of experiential events.

So we do – we have the food truck, which is kind of more like pop-ups, breweries, festivals where we do live-action oyster shucking. We do like caviar bombs. We have like a kelp kimchi grilled cheese. We can do lobster roll.

And then we also do the private events. We do a lot of weddings for people.

It's been really cool to have clients come to us and say that they want to work with the company because of our values of sourcing from women or because it's queer owned, or women owned. That's been really cool to find alignment there. And then kind of the third aspect is these experiential events.

So the first partnership that we did was shucking on sailboats. And that was kind of more of like a party kind of cruise, like two-hour harbor cruise and, you know, get the breweries on board and shucking and featuring these farms.

And then we also do learn-to-shuck classes, which is my personal favorite, which is getting folks together to teach people how to shuck, and so to doing demonstrations and teaching folks how to open oysters so that, yeah, maybe they could have that skill for life and they'd be more motivated to buy seafood at their local market and then take them home and feel empowered to shuck them for their friends or family or something at their house.

So it's kind of a long answer.

Q: [9:29] No, it's a great answer. I really appreciate it.

The next question you've kind of already answered, but just in case you have anything you want to add, it's like how did you get into that?

A: [9:36] Yeah. So I think just having mentors. Like I was so just kind of fascinated by the industry as soon as I saw it. I had never even like had a oyster before. Maybe like once until I started working at Maine Oyster. And it was kind of just love it first sight. Like I just really, really – well this is kind of like a, we say feeding two birds with one scone, (laughter) and you get to like help the

environment and like it's good for human health.

Like a lot of the great conversations I've had about different topics have been like over a plate of food, like over a plate of oysters, and they just – they really bring people together. I think, you know, it can kind of be a little polarizing. Either people really like them or really they don't.

But for the people that don't, I feel really grateful that I get to be in that position of like being a safe person for them to like want to try their first oyster, and like I always say if they try, don't like it, you know – never have to try it again.

Q: [10:40] Great. Thank you. Do you have any experience in bookkeeping, bait or gear preparation?

A: [10:45] (laughter) Yes, now I do. I had to learn, definitely, not really bait preparation, because that's one of them other amazing things about oysters. You don't have to put any food or manipulate the environment, you know, that they're grown in. They're just kind of filter feeding off the phytoplankton and algae that's in the water column naturally already, which is why they're like a very carbon neutral kind of source of sustainable protein.

Gear preparation. I mean, one of the very cool things about oyster farming is that it's a pretty low barrier to entry, but there is like a lot you have to learn. But if you can just go out there and buy the gear, there's a lot of information online. Or if you had the privilege to be, you know, kind of in the hotspot like I was where there was a lot of folks around who would teach you, you can kind of hone in on that local knowledge of what's worked best for other people about how to build the gear.

Most folks in the Casco Bay area growing in floating bag culture, which requires taking these plastic mesh bags and kind of folding them into these boxes and using like a hog ring, which is a small metal ring that you have some pliers to kind of build the box of it.

So yeah, you just kind of learn as you go. I mean, honestly, I think there's a couple really wrong ways to do it, but there's no – I don't think anyone's figured out like the perfect right way to do it. I mean, maybe they figured out the perfect right way to do it for them. That works for them and the environmental conditions of their site. But that's one reason why I love it too is because it can be very unique based on, you know, where you're farming.

Q: [12:28] And how do you make your connections with your farmers?

A: [12:31] So that's interesting to try and really think about. I mean, I was kind of just in it for a long time. I just had again, like the privilege of just kind of being there on the ground level when I feel like it was really taking off and getting really hot again. And yeah, I just kind of, I just got to be there and just really got to like listen

to people and hear what the needs were.

And, you know, one of the best things I heard at the time when I wanted to start a farm right off the bat was, well, that's great, but who's going to buy your product? And so I think that's kind of really where Lady Shuckers came into play too as a buyer of shellfish was kind of like, OK, well, I really want to create this market for farmers and I want to be able to purchase product. I want to be able to give them money and support their farms and support their businesses with kind of this underlying social mission.

And so I think the farmers that felt aligned with that goal, they kind of came to me and I'm just grateful that coinciding that a lot of these folks that I buy from have been friends of mine for the last like seven years – six, seven years.

Q: [13:49] Awesome. And what is sort of the geographic range of farms you buy from?

A: [13:54] Yeah, so in the beginning, it was quite broad. Have connections with folks all up and down the coast from my time in Maine Oyster Company who used to sell there as far north as, yeah, Ellsworth and Deer Isle and South Thomaston and Islesboro. But operationally, kind of made a lot more sense as the company is based here in South Portland and, you know, my home is in Portland, and that's kind of where my base is.

You know, as the company is still growing, it kind of made a lot more sense to, you know, source from farms that were a little near – nearby. So the Casco Bay Area is primarily where we get product from. Yarmouth. Freeport. We work with, yeah, Lanes Island Oyster, Wolfe Neck Oyster, Nauti Sisters Sea Farm, Emily's Oysters. And we have our own farm coming online soon to have product probably next year.

Q: [14:53] Can you talk a little more about that?

A: [14:55] Yeah, sure. So yeah, I always wanted to start my own oyster farm. I mean, that was like immediately what I wanted to do. It seemed like what I was more like suited for with my own personal experience with like just kind of labor and farming. I didn't go to school for business, or hospitality, or I didn't work in the food industry really much at all.

But yeah, it felt like a huge goal to put some seed in the water last year. I started working for Wolfe Neck Oyster Farm and really just making more trips out onto the water, out into the bay, which is very close to where I currently live. So definitely have that privilege and that access to be able to go nearby and just get on a farm.

But yeah, put some seed in the water last year out by Lanes Island and officially they'll be moving just a little bit over from the plot that they are now. Had 50,000 oyster – six to eight millimeter size oyster seed in there in the floating bags.

And yeah, they've been just kind of doing their thing, staying low all winter. They're not that big. But yeah, this season they'll transfer it to their forever home and keep growing and, yeah, oysters in Maine, take about like two-and-a-half, three years to get to be market size.

So, I don't know, it's tough though. With the – we had a record temperature year in Casco Bay last year. So I think the oysters are growing a little faster than they would normally because there's – the water temperatures stayed warmer for longer.

But yeah, I'm just excited to be able to supply our own, you know, operations with some product too, while still like, you know, supporting other farmers.

Q: [16:45] Great, that's really exciting. Can you talk a little bit more about your experience in processing and marketing and maybe like trade as well?

A: [16:56] Yeah. The marketing has been pretty organic, honestly. I tried to keep my personal life and my work life separate. But it's hard sometimes because I feel like, I'm the face – like when you're a startup, it's like you're the face of your company. And it's also, you know, something that I love. When you have a business, it's like your kid, you know, you can't leave it for too long or something's going to happen.

So yeah, I feel like largely being able to just utilize some of the free tools that were available to me is where I started. I took advantage of social media like Instagram, Facebook, not really so much TikTok, but we're coming.

But just utilizing some of these free marketing tools to just start talking about, you know, connecting with the authenticity of my own love for why I'm doing it. And kind of just putting it out there for people not really expecting for any outcome or to get business necessarily from it.

I didn't start this company to make money. I did it because it is a passion of mine. And I felt it was purposeful work too. And kind of, I think through that lens, like the – you know, the leads and the collaborations have kind of come very, very organically.

We get a lot of inquiry through our website, but we're kind of working on, I think just a little bit of a freshen up of the brand at this point because that's really what we're building is like a whole brand that – you know, I'd like to have an umbrella that could expand, you know, to any person who identifies with the mission as what a Lady Shucker means to them, like throughout the country, throughout the world, you know?

And it's been really cool to connect with like other folks like in other states who are trying to do similar, like mobile raw bar pop-ups. Maybe not with the same mission, but who have reached out just kind of, yeah, looking up to what the

company's doing and wanting to kind of follow a similar trend.

And for me, it's like, I think that's awesome. It's like I want to put more content out so we can widen the pipeline and, you know, get more product through. That's really the goal there.

But yeah, the marketing's just been about showing up authentically and, yeah, trying to align with organizations and other businesses that see the value and what we're doing.

Q: [19:27] And do you have any experience in advocacy or community-based organization?

A: [19:34] I think I'm kind of natural – like I'm kind of like a natural marketer. Entrepreneur – I've always just been kind of entrepreneurial, like ever since I was young. I never feel like I fell into like boxes of, I don't know, "the path" on how it should be. And I think the society that we live in.

So, yeah, I mean, definitely working with like those communities in Madagascar, I think, helped with organizing people and taking pretty big concepts and breaking it down into small, manageable pieces. Because it's a lot. Like I'm not going to say that having this business, you know, having the farm, hiring people, you know, being my own boss, like creating boundaries with, you know, different ways you conduct yourself.

I'm not going to say that that's like been an easy journey. But I think if you can just trust that like it's all going to work out as long as your intentions are like in the right place, that is a big part of it.

And yeah, I do feel like I'm well suited, you know, for this role and I feel very supported by the industry as a whole for what I'm doing.

Q: [20:49] And what does an average day of work look like for you?

A: [20:52] Well, the company is still very small, right? It's just me, myself and I. I do have – I had like four or five part time folks come on last summer to help out with shucking gigs.

But it is seasonal. So our season pretty much starts in April and then goes through really November into the holidays. And then we kind of like, you know, close down everything.

The food truck gets shut down and like October, it gets winterized. But right around this time of year we're going to be opening everything up.

And so, yeah, typical work day for me in the off-season looks like answering e-



mails. You know, a lot of e-mail stuff. Like I said, we're working on some new kind of rebrand concepts to get some new merchandise out there, connecting with, you know, other folks that just want to do oyster events.

And then there's all the not fun stuff like balancing the checkbook, and making sure the bills are paid and, you know, renewing licenses and permits and, you know, paying the bills.

[phone rings]

Oops, that's someone. (laughter)

So yeah, I mean in the on season, it looks like planning. A lot of planning. Getting people ready for the gigs. I found pretty quickly in my first summer that if I tried to do everything I would get burnt out. And anybody that's a small business owner, you know, knows that delegating like staff and having employees, you know, that's a whole other part of the job. Making sure that they feel supported, you know, when they're going into the gigs. Because in my opinion, every gig is an opportunity to be our best self.

A lot of times we're doing people's weddings, you know. And we want it to be received well. And we also want to make sure that the product itself is being properly cared for. It is a raw perishable product. And so that people feel ready for the type of things we're going into.

So having a lot of calls with, you know, the folks that are going to be working for us, you know, putting together stuff to market on social media. It's all calendar. If it's not on my Google calendar, like I don't know what's happening honestly. Yeah, a lot of planning.

Q: [23:17] Thank you. And do you currently hold any commercial fishing licenses?

A: [23:20] I hold an aquaculture harvester license. Yeah. And that's pretty much it. Yeah. Don't have much time for much other commercial fishing. But oystering will always, you know, be a love of mine and I hope to do it as long as my body allows.

Q: [23:45] Great. Thank you. And how do you feel that your background or identity shapes your work in the sector? I'll ask you that and there's a follow up question to that.

A: [23:58] Yeah. I mean, honestly, I feel like it works for me. Because I'm not just talking to talk. Like I feel like I walk the walk too.

You know, I'm not just doing this for like Internet points or for, I think kind of like the – the materialistic or the external things. Like I'm doing it because I truly

believe in the industry. I believe in the power of the community we have here in Maine.

I want to create more opportunities to advance and elevate the Maine seafood brand, especially as we see, you know, the lobster are kind of golden child. The lobster fishery kind of diminish. And, you know, that fishery kind of having some issues with different environmental things. And harvesters having to move farther, farther offshore to meet their demands.

You know, I see the oyster as a very accessible option for us to piggyback off of in the Maine seafood industry. And you know, I've definitely lived a couple of lives. I've used up some of my non-cat lives here on this earth. This is so far. But I think I got plenty to go, hopefully. God willing.

But yeah, it's really, it's really like what I love to do, you know. I believe that it can make a difference in some of these really big issues that we're facing right now. Like climate change. Like food insecurity. Like – it's just going to be the key, you know, if we can all get on board and kind of work together.

And yeah, I think being someone from Maine, it makes me feel very passionate about supporting my home. I feel like I kind of ran from my home for a while. I was a little bit of a traveler, a little bit of a vagabond. And I feel really grateful to finally be making roots back here and be doing something that is so positive for my Maine heritage.

And also as it, you know, insofar as when it comes to, you know, supporting underrepresented groups as, you know, a queer woman in the industry, it feels really good to be able to, you know, embody that and telling parts of that story that, you know, didn't always feel the easiest to talk about. And it feels really good to be able to just kind of let go of some of the pain that might have come from that story and to be able to just put it out there for people, and to know that it's coming from like a place of like my true self, and to not feel like it has to be hidden anymore, and to see people kind of come to support that.

It just feels really good. It feels like I'm right where I have to be. Right where I need to.

Q: [26:57] Great. And do you feel like that – that identity piece – do you feel like that affects the way that others perceive or treat you in the industry?

A: [27:07] I don't think so. Definitely, definitely not. Definitely not. I mean, I think no matter how you identify, you know, we have a lot of power in the now and we have like a choice every day for what we can do with like a day. We really do like have the power to choose how we want to conduct ourselves, how we want to show up in the world.

And so I think through a series of choices that I made throughout my life for whatever reason, I was able to perform really strong bonds with people. And so they were – just wanted to see me succeed. And, you know, if anything, I think, you know, by being more honest, by being more open with people about what's really going on, I've been able to like create stronger relationships with folks. And so it doesn't feel just kind of like surface level, you know?

Yeah. I'm really grateful for the support.

Q: [28:08] That's awesome. How does your role in – interact with any family or caregiving responsibilities you may or may not have?

A: [28:23] Well, my – really, like I come from a very small family. Always felt calm, like a little sad, like as an only child, you know, I always want a brother or sister or something. And so I think in that light, you know, anything I did in my life, like career-wise or education-wise, you know, I always had – I'm grateful to have both my mother and my father in my life and their support.

But, you know, it hasn't always been a walk in the park with that either, but definitely felt some pressure, like at different times, that I had to be like, you know, this excellent person.

And, you know, at times, it didn't feel like I could access that. But, you know, my mom in particular has supported me like to the very end, like when I went to go to a hippie school, I wanted to join the Peace Corps, you know. I start Lady Shuckers. You know? I come out, you know, whatever. She has like been there for me, just like to the end.

And I'll talk about support a couple of times on this call, like really when you give a person an environment in which they can grow and just feel into like themselves and what's going to work for them, like you'll see magic happen.

And so yeah, I think my work now in both, you know, my family dynamics, my romantic dynamics, and in my business dynamics, it's about how do I create that environment for people to feel free that they can feel into, you know, what's going to be best for them and so that they can grow and to just, you know, support them in that.

Q: [29:53] Great. And then sort of transitioning into environmental changes. Can you describe any changes in the marine environment you've noticed, if you've noticed any?

A: [30:06] There's more oyster farms out there. That's for sure. And that's, you know, kind of – can be a polarizing topic as well for some people that might not understand the real reason why they're there and, you know, why they should support it, and they're kind of more entrenched in the, oh, you know, what's this,

what's going to happen to my backyard, and, you know, kind of don't want to see it, smell it, hear it or whatever.

If anything, coming from an environmental perspective, we've seen that in areas where the sea floor is completely barren and there's populations of different, like microorganisms or sea vegetables. I'm thinking of eel grass right now. You can't put an oyster farm anywhere where there's eel grass in the bay.

And so inherently from that, you're going to have an oyster farm in a bare area and because the oysters, with their filter feeding and how they eat and filter, they're creating these whole, like, little micro climate, micro diversity hotspots. And we've actually seen that these populations of eel grass that were once there are coming back where the oyster farm is because it's creating this whole habitat for fish and crabs and, you know, other little critters to kind of like reoccupy.

So, if anything, I think oyster farming is helping our environment by creating this little microbiomes.

Q: [31:37] And you mentioned, um, like, much higher temperatures. Have you seen any changes with that?

A: [31:46] Well, definitely, it's not ideal, right, for product that, you know, is eaten raw. What it basically means is that when product comes out of the water at a little bit higher temperature, it needs to get back down to a refrigerated temperature a little bit faster.

And there's viruses in raw shellfish. There's inherent, I think, risk with eating any raw or undercooked product, whether it's shellfish, or meat, or hamburger, or steak tartar, whatever it is. There's inherent risk with eating raw product and in oysters, they have this virus called Vibrio in them.

And there's a couple different strains of it, and it hadn't been in Maine in a really long time, just very rare cases, but it can make you sick. And so now we're seeing that when product comes out of the water at a little bit higher, what's already existing in the oyster, it – it – it replicates if it gets in the higher temperature.

And so those levels that were normally pretty low and stayed low can be getting higher without, you know, people even realizing it. And it's not even conclusive across a whole batch, you know? It's – it's spec – it can be very, very well within each individual oyster. So if you pull 100 oysters out of the water at the same time, one could have the high levels and the other ones could be fine.

And to add another level of complexity, it's even variable in terms of like who's going to get sick from it. It has to do with people's different gut health and people's different levels of immune system.

So it's been a little bit hard, I think, for the industry to hear in recent years that, you know, some harvesting areas that previously were not under these, what we call like Vibrio control areas, which basically just means there's – they're in a higher risk group, and they have to have a little bit more stricter protocol for post harvest handling.

And that goes on my end too when I take them from the dealership to an event and they're in a cooler.

I think that's been a little bit harder to hear that, you know, these areas do have to have some stricter protocols because it just wasn't like that in the past. But, you know, from what I've learned about screening on a whole is that it's – it's for the best and it just means that if everybody can follow this protocol, you know. There will be less people getting sick from oysters. And I think that's what everybody wants.

Q: [34:21] Great. Thank you so much. And how are those changes impacting you as Lady Shuckers?

A: [34:28] Yeah. I think just needing to up our – up our game a little bit more, um, making sure that stuff is being tempt regularly and often, um, especially on the warmer summer days.

We purchase all our shellfish through the Maine Family Sea Farm Cooperative Dealership, which I'm the vice president for – shout out Maine Family Sea Farm.

But yeah, so basically what that means is that I can purchase from harvesters, so folks that don't have a dealer license, and they can drop off at the dealership, which basically what that is is like a refrigerated shipping container that has product in it, and it's tempt, and sanitization checks and all the product that comes in is logged in and when it comes out, it's logged out.

So yeah, from a Lady Shuckers perspective, it just means having people that are not me trained very well on the operations, and to not cut corners, and to have things organized. Community's amazing and it can make us feel so supported, but with more people like involved, there can be a little bit more opportunity for error to be made.

So I think it's just about increasing communication and just making sure that everybody understands what's expected so that people can, you know, feel good about doing their job safely and effectively.

Q: [36:00] Great. Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about like what it's been like to move towards that or make those changes?

A: [36:07] Yeah, there's been some really amazing people that have worked for me. I

mean, particularly last year, which was the company's second full year in business, I could not have done it without, you know, those four or five folks that were – that were helping out, that were tapping in.

You know, at certain times we had three or four events going on one day. And kind of my role as kind of the facilitator is kind of like getting every – you know, picking every – ordering everything. Getting everything here and kind of just creating little stations of gear and product for everybody so that they know what they're supposed to do when they go in and they can just focus on doing their job correctly.

So as much as possible, I try to take out like, oh, prep the lemons like this and do the menu like this. It's like, I'm still at a stage where I do all that stuff for folks and have it all portioned out so that I can just send directions and send – arrive by this time, start by this time, done by this time, and just have it be very clear for people so that they can just focus on shucking the best dang oysters they can.

And yeah, having fun with it too. Maybe having a little fun with it because what we do is pretty fun.

Q: [37:22] Great. And have you like made any changes to like, how you process, where you source? Anything sort of like that, the equipment you use, when you're thinking about these environmental changes?

A: [37:36] Well, definitely like the upgrade to this space, Fork Food Lab, this just happened last year. It used to be in a different location in Portland, which was a little closer to my house, but it wasn't near as big.

So just from a storage perspective, you know, we're an event company. So we have pans, and trays, and paper products, and buckets, and little thingy things. I don't even know what we have, but we have a lot of stuff. All of a sudden. And cold storage as well, finding, you know, space to store the oysters. I don't know how much a bag of 100 oyster weighs, but probably close to like, between 30 and 50 pounds, depending. Sometimes we get jumbos for fried oysters. Those are, those are big.

So just being able to have more space in general. We've always sourced through the Maine Family Sea Farm Co-op, in accordance with state regulation. But yeah, Fork – Fork Food Lab and the upgrade of this space to have more dry stores, to have more cold storage, and to have, I think just access for folks to get into the space.

You know, it's as simple as having a key code entry where, you know, I can say, hey, this stuff is here for you to grab and just pop in. You know, I don't feel like I have to be there all the time, which I think energetically is a drain that I could kind of like plug a little bit by being like, oh, is, are they going to be able to get into the space and like, is everything going to be fine? It's like, they can get in. They, they

can just get in and do their, do their job.

And so, yeah, definitely having the space has been huge. As an incubator, while we're still in the startup phase, but eventually I'd really love to see us have our own like restaurant space to do events and stuff like that. I think we could be really successful there.

I don't know if it's in Portland. And I don't know when it's going to happen, but hopefully it happens in the right timing.

Q: [39:30] Could you talk about like what your dream for that looks like?

A: [39:38] Yeah. So as a queer woman, I feel like I get the benefits of like the best of both communities. Like I have – I feel like I like get to access like, you know, my – my gals, like my – my farmers. My – my ladies. You know, they're – they're my – they're my homies. And yeah, it's just been so great to have relationships with them. And then kind of being more open, you know, online about, uh, you know, supporting queer people in the industry too, and creating visibility for –for folks in that way.

I've been able to connect with a lot more like business owners and wanted to work with other business owners that are queer, and support, you know, different folks in – in different industries to kind of work with there.

And I would just love to have like a queer kind of like oyster night club. I don't drink, part of, I think, one of the reasons why this company has been successful is because I took it upon myself to get sober in the first year of starting it and realized that I kind of had a destructive past with drugs and alcohol after working in the service industry and different life things.

So I made decision to put that down really hard and focus on, you know, the business stuff. If I was really going to, you know, kind of talk the talk about being this role model for folks in the industry, you know, I had to embody that in my own practice.

And so to circle back like, I don't – I like going to bars, but I don't really partake anymore. But I love to dance, and I love music, and I love the performing arts. And there's a lot of amazing just like local artists in the Portland area. And I'd love to just like – I feel like I have such a great network of different people from different industries and different sectors who are all really good at what they do. And I'd love to just be able to bring that together and have a space to host people, to be able to do their different creative artistic foodie things there.

So yeah, some sort of like a oyster art nightclub that yeah, it's focused on kind of, I think, queer visibility. Because I think as vibrant and diverse and amazing as a city Portland is, I think they're still lacking there in some regard. And I think the city is

hungry for some representation in a bar scene where maybe the focus is not drinking and partying.

Q: [42:17] Cool. And you've talked a lot about support and how valuable support has been for you. And I guess I'm curious if you could talk a little bit more about like the kinds of support that have been most valuable, maybe thinking about resources, relationships, knowledge, training. Those sort of things.

A: [42:36] Yeah. Yeah. Well, definitely Maine Sea Grant has been there for us from the jump. That was how the company originally got started. We applied for a small grant of funding in like a pitch, a business pitch competition that was during kind of like COVID, like looking for, you know, businesses to start ups, that come into the industry for COVID out of the pandemic and we pitched and we got funded. And so they've been huge from the jump.

You know, one of my best friends, Jacqueline Roubideaux, is an extension agent there and pulls us into different seaweed events and things like that. Maine Oyster Company is my – is my alma mater. That's where I learned about shucking. That's where I learned about events. That's where I learned about oyster reproductive cycles. Where I learned about oyster farming. It's where I learned about business, and how to kind of run a food and beverage business.

And yeah, John Herrigel was very integral for me in, you know, being a huge mentor for me in a lot of ways, both at the restaurant and at their oyster farm, which is located in Phippsburg, Maine that we used to, you know, take people out on farm tours and stuff like that on the boat.

There's a couple other growers in, you know, that Freeport-Yarmouth area. It's almost like the list is like too long, which is crazy. But definitely Amanda Moeser, huge role model for me from the beginning. Emily – Emily Selinger, at Emily's Oysters, they – they were like, you know, the two folks that I first kind of saw when I was in the bar of shucking, and I saw them come in and I was like, OK, like I – I could – like that could be me, like I could do that. You know? So they were huge expanders for me, and to just kind of coming to believe what could be possible if I really just applied myself and stuck with it.

Just the people that get back to me quickly that when I say, hey, I need to buy like 200 oysters, like, can you do that? And they're like, yup. That is like a huge luxury that I have and I think it's because they know me personally. And I'm hopeful that they see it as a benefit too for their product to be, you know, associated with our brand.

And I think that comes from like trust in the relationship because they know that, you know, we're going to do a good job at, you know, marketing and making sure that people walk away, you know, knowing that those are the best oysters they never had, and where can they go to find more information. And do they do farm



tours? And, yeah, it just really feels like the right thing that I need to be doing even though, you know, the food service industry is still the food service industry and it's not always glamorous.

But yeah, I think just this model of trying to diversify the supply chain with value-added products and services, you know, because people mostly just experience oysters right in the restaurant, but it is kind of like a picnic food when you think about it. You know, you can just serve it up on ice in like a compostable container at like a fair or something and people are really excited about that.

So, yeah, I think just being able to have more people come in so that we can continue to do more of what we're doing is the goal.

Q: [45:59] Great. And as you, like, keep looking towards the future, are there any things that you're like planning to do or really want to do to sort of like, I don't know, adapt to any challenges that you see coming up or just what does that look like for you?

A: [46:13] Yeah. I'd love to lean into a little bit more about preservation of oysters just because the company is so seasonal with events and just mean we get apparently a couple feet of snow on the ground in mid-March now.

So looking at, you know, smoking, freezing, you know, preserving oysters in more different ways so we can, you know, continue to uphold one sect of our company's mission, which is to, you know, diversify the supply chain. People mostly just have them around the half shell. And supply people with value-added products and services to be able to have, you know, a more unique and kind of out of the box way to be able to experience the products in their homes.

So I think, yeah, just being able to bring in some more young, like entrepreneurial minds to weigh in on those topics could be really beneficial. I mean, we have Fork Food Lab, which has so many of like the appliances and the real, like, operational stuff that we need to be able to process.

We just applied for – to the Department of Ag to start bottling our mignonettes and cocktail sauces and selling that to little stores who really honestly need it and they always have inquiries like people are always asking about mignonettes. They don't know where to get them. So partnering with people like Harbor Fish and stuff like that. And I think being able to serve it up in a very cute kind of marketing little package could be really fun for people.

And we have the ability to do that with the licensing out of this space. So being able to lean more into this space and all it kind of gives for us in the time while we're here.

Q: [47:55] Great. And also as you look towards the future, what is sort of your biggest

concern about the marine environment, looking – like thinking about the future of Maine's fisheries and aquaculture?

A: [48:11] Yeah. I mean climate change is very real. So climate change, ocean acidification, those are all things that are happening right now that I think minds are working on, but it's just not happening fast enough to really try to counteract some of the negative things that are happening unfortunately.

But as it pertains to climate change, the Vibrio thing is real. I think there's been a lot of scare throughout this day and in different parts of the country about that already. And I'd hate for there to be this negative perception around eating shellfish raw and that, ew, it's going to make you sick.

I think it's already there a little bit, but as much as we can do on our ends as operators and stewards to try and combat that by having good handling practices and talking about that, and creating some visibility about that through education, I think that'll help kind of diffuse spears people might have.

And I think as far as ocean acidification goes, I mean, that's just like a more acidic ocean is bad for shell, you know, mollusks. And oysters are one of those things that can really impact the way they grow their shells.

And so yeah, it can just kind of take a lot longer. They can be less resilient to pests and things like that. Yeah, that's – that's worrisome. I'm very interested in pursuing and what I can in my role in oyster shell recycling and looking into more of like, you know, how that can maybe help butt against some of those ocean acidification stuff we're experiencing in the tidal mud flat areas. I know there's a lot of larger farms that are putting shell back into the marine environment to try and remediate some of that.

As far as any like social impacts go, you know, there are some folks right now that are talking about putting moratoriums on aquacultures. And that's really scary to me because it just takes like one or two people to really, you know, shake things up.

But I want to lean into like the power we have in the industry to really come together, to again, like educate people about why this is like a very good decision for Maine and for the country and for the world and why we should continue to move in this direction, as opposed to feeding into that fear-based narrative of like, oh, you know, this is going to mar your view of your ocean side property and, you know, restrict your recreational boat activities and, you know, it's impeding on commercial fishermen. And, you know, their – their, you know, harvest.

And it's just not that, you know? There's plenty of room for everybody out there on the bay. Of all the aquaculture leases that are approved in Maine, you put them all together – shellfish, oysters, kelp, scallops, muscles – you put them all together, it's less than 1% of the entire coastline. So there's still plenty of area there for folks to

be able to, you know, do their activities and for us to all co-exist.

And I think, again, just education and increasing aquaculture literacy is going to be huge as an industry to get on the same page about so that we can be standardized in what we're saying.

Q: [51:43] Cool. And then sort of transitioning to some questions about climate resilience. Have you ever participated in any kind of climate resilience training or programs for people in the fishing industry, fishing and aquaculture?

A: [51:59] I guess not specifically about climate resilience. I mean, my own, you know, little interest that I have about the subject matter as a whole, I've tried to pursue them. I did – I worked on Maine's first pilot oyster shell recycling project back in 2021, where we were collecting shell from like eight different restaurants and curing them to try and put them back into the environment for ocean acidification.

But specifically, you know, a climate-based training – you know, I'm a part of this women and non-known binary aquaculture cohort right now. I've taken the aquaculture and shared waters class, which is all about kind of like, you know, farming and life cycle safety on the water, things like that. But in terms of climate specific, no. And I think there's a real need for it right now for educators, which I would consider myself to be an educator.

Q: [52:56] Yeah, because my sort of follow-up question is like, what do you think would be really effective at looking at like those sort of things or strategies for climate-related impacts?

A: [53:04] I think so much of the time it just feels like this giant issue that everybody knows is happening. But you know, what is the real data? What is the real data? And I feel like the data has – it changes a lot from year to year. I feel like there's like, it's fluctuating fast.

And I want to be able to feel, you know, knowledgeable about that data and about how to disseminate it to folks in a way that feels like they can do something in their own corner of the world to try and help it. Because a lot of times at the food truck, we're having these conversations about climate – climate change. We're having these conversations about land use. We're having these conversations about licensing. We're having the conversations about oysters and Vibrio. We're having them right at the truck. And it's such a great meeting place for people to talk about these larger issues.

And so, yeah, I think some sort of a workshop or something about it that really, you know, gave people the information about what's going on and what they could do in their own neck of the woods to help would be very useful.

Q: [54:15] And are there any other types of changes you're experiencing that you want to tell us about?

A: [54:22] Just like in the industry as a whole?

Q: [54:23] Sure, yeah, in your role. Anything. Yeah.

A: [54:25] I mean, I see a lot more younger folks coming into the industry and that's really cool. I think, you know, representation matters. It takes – well, I'll speak from my experience, it took me seeing someone kind of like me out there doing it to say, hey, I can do it too. And that's what I'm trying to be for other people right now.

And so, you know, we need people of different backgrounds, people of different races, ethnicities, you know, with different experiences to come into this industry so that we can look at these topics from a very intersectional point of view and we can try to tackle them together.

And I think just the more we can, again, just widen that door to let more people in and be receptive to, you know, people who might be a little bit different, to be able to, you know, really support and create change. I think that's where we're going.

And, you know, there's more programming I'm seeing at the university level for folks that specifically want to pursue a career path in aquaculture. That was not an option at the school I went to when I was, you know, in school. I think seeing more trade programs for people to get involved in aquaculture and that, you know, you can really have a lot of opportunity to be your own boss in this industry and have a really good life. And maybe have that work-life balance that, you know, a lot of people kind of dream of.

You know, in Maine, we're just – we have this amazing ecosystem resources of the coastline. It's just – it's not accessible everywhere in the state, but for the communities that are along it, you know, that's where we should be focusing efforts of getting more people into the industry because we're going to need brilliant people and different people to handle the problems of our time and for future times.

Q: [56:17] And can you tell me about any other opportunities or positive changes you've seen in your time?

A: [56:22] It's really cool what Abby Barrows is doing up in Deer Isle. She is trialing and working on the first plastic-free oyster farm. So as much as oysters clean the environment and they're good for you, a lot of times in practice for them, you know, you have to take a boat. There's plastic. A lot of plastic that's being used. You know, we're running a generator that uses fuel.

And so I really like what she's doing in terms of wanting to make a change. And that change is to use less plastic on the farm and really have it be sustainable in

practice as well as like the end user kind of experiences. But to really have it be kind of carbon neutral.

And so, you know, she does things like by not using like any, you know, plastic paint on the boat, she has a solar-powered generator, solar-powered tumbler. She has been experimenting with different gear made out of wood, made out of cork, made out of mushrooms, buoys, just really cool stuff that's super innovative.

And the cool thing about aquaculture is that the next thing that someone could do could be like the next standard because it's so new and it's so just, I think it's just so ripe for people to kind of make these innovations and for people to catch on.

And so I really find it very admirable that she's doing it first with her own operations entirely to prove that it's possible both financially and operationally and to then be able to put that out there for people to follow suit if they wish.

Q: [58:10] Great. And have you noticed any changes in women's presence, participation or status in your time?

A: [58:17] There's a lot more women getting into oyster farming I've seen over the last seven years, which is cool to say.

Yeah, when I first started working for Maine Oyster in 2018, I think there was only like – I think there was only like 10 or 12 women-own farms, you know, women – and these are lease holders and LPA holders too. Now there's at least double that. About 15% of the farms in Maine are owned and operated by women. And even though I think that's great, it's better than zero, it's still a very small percentage.

This is a historically dominated cis white-male dominated industry here in Maine. Fishing. And so I think it is helping.

I think women – there's a couple of things that women do really well in business, and I think marketing is one of them. And I think as long as we can keep showing up in those spaces that we're already good at, it's going to continue to create these ripple effects in the spaces that, you know, maybe we need a little bit of work in.

And I'm just hopeful that, you know, the people that really need to hear this information, you know, can hear it because there's enough space for everybody out there. And like I said, we're going to need a lot of people, different people that maybe have not historically been involved in the industry to come together to tackle these issues that we're all facing as a collective.

Q: [59:48] And what is sort of your hopeful vision for the future of Maine's fisheries and aquaculture?

A: [59:53] Yeah, I'm – kind of already happening. I mean, really, it's so moving to me

and humbling to me that Maine is a part of the conversations in the forefront of the conversations at these aquaculture conferences we go to, you know, and not just from a farming and operational perspective, but from like a diversity, quality, inclusion and perspective too. And just about what works, you know? Alaska's in there too, but Maine is definitely in the conversation.

And I think it's because of support, like institutions, like the Maine Aquaculture Associations and then, you know, these cooperatives that are coming together and, you know, the individual owner-operators too that are all kind of doing their own thing and their own lane, but like have these connections that kind of expand into, you know, just across different sectors.

I think it's buzzing right now. Like I think Maine and aquaculture is really buzzing. And I hope that it's just going to continue to get better and better, you know.

From the Lady Shuckers standpoint, you know, I'd love to be able to franchise out with the name and, you know, have little shuck shacks all over different places and all kind of sourcing those Maine oyster products and getting them into other places where, you know, they could – the price point could be a little higher into the Floridas, into the Vermonts, into the Bostons, into the New York Cities to just continue to, you know, elevate and advance the Maine Sea food brand and, yeah, really give money to these farmers.

I think supply is definitely still getting there. I think for a long time that was the question just because the turnover. You know, you have to wait two-and-a-half, three years to have your product. But I think the supply is starting to get there.

I – it's my hope that regulation will continue to be supportive of these advances and want to move people's lease applications along quickly while also, you know, keeping in mind that, you know, we want to grow sustainably.

Q: [1:02:08] Great. And is there anything else you wanted to talk about with us before we end the interview?

A: [1:02:13] I'm just really happy to be a part of it, that you guys, you know, felt valuable to hear the contributions that, you know, I've made to the industry and that Lady Shuckers has made to the industry. It's, yeah, it's just truly so humbling to be here.

So thank you for wanting to, you know, put my voice as part of this product. And I hope that my voice, you know, kind of represents a lot of other people that are affiliated with the business who have helped to get me here too. So thank you.

Q: [1:02:44] Great. Thank you so much. And Jesse, you have any questions before I turn up recorder?

F: [1:02:47] Yup, you guys got it all. (laughter)

Q: [1:02:49] Great. Thank you so much. I'll stop this.

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