

Deliciously small

PRISTINE OYSTER FARM, COFFIN BAY

IT WAS THE SECRET SHARED AMONG OYSTER GROWERS who wanted a feed as they worked on their oyster leases: they'd always select the smaller oysters with rounded shells, finding their plump meat to be sweeter and more delicious. However, these were never viewed as being commercially viable when compared to the larger Pacific oysters – until Brendan Guidera of Pristine Oyster Farm offered them to a contingent of chefs from around Australia visiting Coffin Bay in May this year.

“It created a bit of an instant sensation,” says Brendan, noting that Shannon Bennett of Melbourne’s famed Vue de Monde restaurant was first among the visiting chefs to order a shipment of these unusual small Pacific oysters. “I also offered some to The Oyster Beds restaurant here in Coffin Bay and they were really impressed with them. If I had offered them to wholesalers or retailers first, I would

have been laughed at. Instead, the signs were right for me to start my first serious commercial crop of these new oysters this year.”

Brendan’s interest in isolating and marketing the smaller oyster had been piqued in February 2007, when he travelled to Dubai with the Eyre Regional Development Board to participate in a major food industry expo. Deciding to cook some of his small oysters on the exhibition stand, Brendan found that interested delegates compared them favourably to the Kumamoto oyster – a rare species of small oyster originating in the waters off Kumamoto in Japan but now mainly grown in small numbers in the United States. Realising the commercial potential of such a rare delicacy, Brendan has called his new product a Kumamoto style oyster.

Unlike the familiar Pacific oysters – plate shaped, usually between 85mm and 90mm in length – the Kumamoto style oyster is only about 50mm long. However, it’s not only size that is significant, but also its shape. “I couldn’t grow these in Cowell,” explains Brendan, identifying where his family has run another oyster farm for the past 14 years. “The Kumamoto style oyster can only be grown in the very best waters, with plenty of tidal movement and the ability for the shells to roll a lot, to get their more rounded shape.”

It requires some very careful husbandry to ensure success. Potential Kumamoto style oysters are specifically selected as spats (juvenile growths) based on their shape and, to control their growth pattern, are relocated to waters with an especially rich upwelling of nutrients from the Southern Ocean. “The pristine water quality over here is due to the combination of high salinity, sparse population and the absence of rivers flowing into the waterways,” says Brendan. “It’s how the oysters thrive without growing too big.”

While these oysters currently represent only a small proportion of the five million farmed annually from the Pristine Oyster Farm leases at Coffin Bay and neighbouring Franklin Harbour, Brendan wants to be processing up to 500,000 Kumamoto style oysters within 12 months. However, even though they reap a premium price of 25 per cent above standard Pacific oysters, Brendan wants product development to proceed at a manageable rate. “I’m actually getting pushed to supply more of these than I’m comfortable with at this time,” he says. “It really can’t be rushed. Only an emphasis on absolute quality will see this venture work.”

Overseas buyers are especially impressed by the quality of these oysters, with shipments already going to Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore, and a Mexican buyer who recently visited Coffin Bay is also showing interest. To meet escalating export demands, Brendan is experimenting with new packaging innovations, to create 5kg oyster storage boxes that are currently used by large European exporters and preferred by the top strata of Middle Eastern and Asian customers. “We have nothing like that here at the moment – it’s only 20kg boxes, and then smaller orders have to be broken down by hand into smaller lots – which is not what the best customers want, so we’re figuring out ways of giving them exactly what they want,” he says. “It’s a rare example of when smaller is actually bigger.”

