

Shinaku Shellfish Co.

Farmer Knowledge Exchange 2025

The Farmer Knowledge Exchange trip took place December 9–18, 2025, with the goal of visiting East Coast oyster farms to learn from different operational models, growing environments, and market approaches that could be adapted to our farm, Shinaku Shellfish Co., in Klawock, Alaska, or benefit the broader oyster community in our region.

We completed the first portion of our original plan, including travel to Maryland and meetings with Maryland oyster farmers. However, worsening winter weather in the upper East Coast—including heavy snow and icy roads—made it unsafe to continue north to Maine. Prioritizing safety, we adjusted our route while keeping the focus on learning opportunities.

After researching farms online, making calls, and reviewing the NC Oyster Trail map, we headed toward North Carolina—only to find that OBX was closed for the season and most farmers were taking a holiday break. Despite this, we were able to visit several farms and connect with local growers and restaurants, gaining insight into their operations and approaches. We also toured a small operation in OBX before continuing south. Once we identified active oyster farm tours, we made our way to Charleston, South Carolina.

In Charleston, through contacts made prior to the trip with Maryland farmer Andy, we visited several oyster farms and tour operators. At Barrier Island Oyster Company, we toured their processing facility, wild-harvest operations, and packaging setup. We also visited local oyster bars and joined a guided farm tour to see how public-facing tours and events are run. These experiences provided valuable insight into warm-water oyster systems, alternative harvest methods, and customer-facing aspects of the business—many of which are directly applicable to long-term goals at Shinaku Shellfish Co., especially as we begin planning farm tours at our own operation this year.

The revised route stayed within the original project scope and budget, and changes were communicated in real time with Sea Grant. Overall, the experiences gained from both northern and southern farms provided a broader perspective on East Coast oyster industries and strengthened the outcomes of the knowledge exchange.

We are beyond thankful for this opportunity and appreciate the funds and those who process these reports to make it possible. Opportunities like this broaden our sights, inspire us to reach higher, and help us provide more for our communities and our business. We are excited to bring some of what we saw on the East Coast home to Alaska.

Gunalcheesh, thank you,

Daily Trip Notes & Highlights

December 10: North Carolina

Flew in and drove south to the outer banks. Arrived in the evening and stopped at Shipwrecks Taphouse and Grill in Kitty Hawk NC to try our first virginica oysters on the east coast. We had both steamed and fried oysters, served with butter, hot sauce, and crackers. First time having both. The fried oysters were better than I thought. I liked the steamed oysters a lot better. They still had the taste of a raw oyster, just kind of plumped up from the steam. Also, the first time having an oyster on a cracker “east coast style,” not bad. But I still prefer raw oysters with less condiments. However, for the duration of this trip I shall study the locals and eat as they do.

December 11: North Carolina

Drove down the outer banks stopping at a few oyster farm business locations to see their tumblers and float bags. The places we stopped at had similar bags to ours, the mesh bags with the 4 liter floats. The floats were located on the sides of the bags, so no matter what side of the bag was facing up, the oysters were submerged. I thought this was interesting and when asking the farmers, they said it's just how they all do it. The tumblers were smaller diameter tubes and a little more light duty than our tumbler, which I thought to be beneficial because then the oysters don't have as far to fall inside the tumbler tube. I think in the end there would be less broken shells using a smaller diameter tube. They also had the tumblers on skiffs with shallow side shells. So none of the farms had a base of operations out on the leased water acreage, only the float bags. All the work was done on the skiffs a few bags at a time and the oysters brought back to the shore based processing facility.

We ended up connecting with Kinnakeet Oyster Company in Avon thanks to a local waitress who suggested we reach out while we were at lunch. Chandler runs a floating bag system—the same one we had just bought and were planning to try on our farm. It was really interesting to see how they manage things in the local conditions

Also, locals call the area the “village”. I laughed at first because it made me think of our villages back home, but it turns out it's a historically and culturally important name. Kinnakeet was the original name for what's now Avon, on Hatteras Island, and it means “that which is mixed,” nodding to early interactions between Algonquian people and English settlers. Learning that gave the visit some extra depth—it's a reminder that oyster farming here is just the latest chapter in a long, layered human and environmental story.

Continued on our way and drove to Myrtle Beach South Carolina that evening and got a hotel.

December 12: South Carolina — Barrier Island Oyster Company

We headed to Charleston South Carolina in the morning to go meet with Josh, the owner of Barrier Island Oyster Company. He was extremely nice and welcoming and showed us his land based operation center. They had around 6 40 foot containers and a small 25 by 20 foot

building which they operated their business out of. The 20x25 building in the front was their DEC certified building where they did any packing and shucking. They had maps on the wall showing the location of their lease and all the surrounding water ways. A lot of shallow curving waterways you could easily get lost in if you didn't have GPS or a map. Next was a container that held all their packaging. Behind that were 2 containers end to end that served as the offices. Behind those were 2 refer containers with an awning off the front covering some tables, size sorting equipment, and hopper conveyor belts.

At Barrier Island Oyster company they sell 3 kinds of product. Oysters grown in floating cages, wild harvested oysters, and clams. The floating cage oysters were grown using the larger 6 bag cages with the floats under the cage, so they can be flipped over to help mitigate bio fouling. Exactly as some of the farms in Alaska use. The wild harvested oysters were just that, harvested right from the beach. The oysters grow in clusters along the shorelines of the sandy water ways nearby their farm. The company had a "wild harvest permit" to harvest them from a specific area nearby their farm. The clusters of oysters are referred to as "blades." These blades of oysters are grown together in a way that makes shucking them very inconvenient so they are steamed to open. This is the traditional way of harvesting and eating oysters in the Charleston area. Before there were floating cage farms there were acreage shore farms that the blades were harvested from. Families would buy bushels of the blade clusters and get together and do a "boil" or "roast". Where they steamed the clusters and dumped them on a table and everyone would hang out and pick the oysters out to eat. Josh said this was a nostalgic way of eating oysters that brought families together and the main customer base was older buyers who are teaching the younger generation how to do this.

While we were there a guy who manufactures the steamer boxes stopped by with a new model for him to use at their upcoming boil. The steamers are aluminum boxes that use propane heat from the bottom. They also have a box with holes that sits on the inside that holds the oysters for steaming. The best way to think of it is like the stainless crab cooker pots we use in Alaska, but square, made from aluminum, and larger to fit a whole bushel at a time. The owner of the cooker company was super friendly and showed us how it worked and told us the evolution of the product that got to where it is today.

Josh said the clams started as a side hustle but then turned into their number one source of income over the oysters. Now they just do a limited amount of oysters and are not growing that area of the farm. They are focusing on growing the clams more. They supply 6 of the major restaurants in Charleston and ship as far north as Maine. In the sorting equipment area in the back they had a piece of equipment that was exactly like a herring or salmon size sorting machine, with 2 rollers that grow farther apart, so as the clams go down the rollers the bigger ones go further to go down a different chute to the right bag. I thought that was a clever way of sorting clams.

He was preparing oysters and clams to put in a smoker and was nice enough to shuck a few of each product for us. The taste of the oysters were obviously good. But it had a very high salinity taste to them. Definitely not as sweet as our cold water oysters. The cage oysters looked like

normal great shaped oysters, and the blade oysters resembled some of our suspended cage oysters that grow longer reaching for feed during the first year. They tasted the same as the caged oysters. The clams were good, but they served the clam meat with all the intestines in the clam shell. Just shuck it and eat everything in it. It was ok, for the clams I prefer the steamers lol. Josh said they were going to be doing a boil at a swap meet behind a bar the next day and invited us to come see how it works.

He also said they just started leasing area to farmers around 2014 and there were only a limited number of farms, I believe it was 12 or 14 farms, and they weren't making any more farm lease permits, so if you wanted one, you had to wait for someone to give it up. Also a lot of the farmers there contracted the farm workers to work and harvest the farm instead of hiring them directly. We thought this might be an interesting thing to adapt back home.

We shared our farming experiences and traded some stickers and departed.

December 13: Charleston, South Carolina — Leon's & Darling Oyster Bar

We went to 2 oyster bars in downtown Charleston. Leon's and The Darling Oyster Bar in downtown.

Leons was a mixed restaurant that had a decent oyster selection, I believe they carried oysters from about 8 locations in the area. We ordered a sampler plate that had 2 of each of the oysters they carried. We had them raw with just lemon juice, hot sauce, and mignonette. They were all virginicas. They were good oysters. Something interesting was from the wild spawn, there were mini oysters on the outside of the shells. I was able to shuck them open and eat the mini oysters that were the size of a small muscle. It was delicious. We only had one round of oysters to save room for The Darling Oyster Bar.

The Darling Oyster Bar was more of an oyster bar. Serving oysters as the main attraction and having a seafood platter that accompanied clams, shrimp, and crab. They had a nicely laid out oyster bar with 3 shuckers working non stop. They had all the different oysters in baskets on ice on the other side of a short glass window so you could watch them work. We ordered another sample platter that had 2 of each kind of oyster. They were all delicious with varying distinct tastes of where they were grown. This bar had probably the best presentation, setup, and merchandise that I have seen anywhere so far. It gave us a lot of ideas for the future of our business not only for promotional products but also for shucking display and presentation.

December 13: Charleston, South Carolina — Oyster Farm Tour

We Booked a tour with The Charleston Oyster Farm. They took us in a fiberglass open boat through the canals to their farm and back. The round trip was about 2 hours. The trip was very informative about the history of the oyster industry in the area as well as the biology of the water ways and animals that lived there. Right away there were dolphins swimming around hunting

fish. The tour guide said they would corral fish up onto the beach then the dolphins would beach themselves eating the fish and roll back into the water.

We saw some locals harvesting the wild “blades” of oysters that Josh had told us about. The oysters grow in clusters about 3 feet wide and would stretch up the beach in different lengths. Some were 10 foot lengths and others 100 feet long. The locals can get a fishing harvest license with the state then go out and get something like 2 bushels a day. These guys took their kayaks out and looked like they were getting a bushel each.

Most of the ride out to the farm our tour guide talked about oyster biology. Once we got to the farm then he talked a little more about the lease and how they worked the cages. Most of their cages were empty as they had just put out a bunch of juvenile oysters and were starting to repopulate the farm for winter.

At the time we were there the water temp was 58 degrees, which was low for them. He said in the summertime the water temp is 70 degrees on average in the shallow canals where the farm is located. On really hot days it can get as high as 90 degrees! Most of the canals are slow moving tidal water between 10 to 30 feet deep. He said when it gets that hot they just jump in the water and swim along the cages flipping them by hand. They had probably around 100 to 150 of the 6 bag cages at that lease. He said they didn't have as much biofouling as we do at our farm, mainly algae growth and a little bit of barnacles. But when they flip the cages the sun kills everything fast.

He also said that when hurricanes are coming, they take the caps off the floats so they fill with water and sink all the cages below the water to avoid damage to the equipment. Then when it's over they pull them up, drain the water and put the caps back on. Even though the weather is way nicer down there, it still takes them 10 months to a year to harvest the fast growing oysters. He pulled a cage that had oysters in it for the tour and let everyone shuck and eat oysters. He had cut up lemons, hot sauce, crackers and prickly pear cactus mignonette he made himself.

While everyone was shucking and eating oysters I asked how the proper way to eat an oyster with a cracker was and they said it varied depending on where your from or how you were taught. You can either put the oyster on the cracker, or eat the oyster then chase it with a cracker, it's all about preference. On the way back we saw these giant pelicans that had 6 foot wing spans that were hanging out on a sandbar right next to the island designated for them. They also said there are sandbars that move every year with the tide and they have to dredge the sand and move it so boats do get stuck on it. They also said all the houses in the area had to be on 16 foot posts or they couldn't get insurance, it was a south carolina law.

After the tour we went to meet Josh at the “boil” or “roast” they were doing. It was behind a bar at a swap meet. He had a table set up with a mini boat filled with ice that he was shucking oysters and clams in. They also had a table set up where they were placing the blade clusters of oysters after steaming and a bunch of people were paying 40 bucks for all you can eat oyster blades. There was a bunch of people around the table opening and eating oysters while drinking beer, it was a pretty sweet set up. We bought a round of oysters and clams. Hung out for a bit and called it a day.

December 14: Travel Day

Drove from South Carolina to Maryland and stayed the night at a hotel, we had a meeting at another farm headquarters the next morning.

December 15: Broomes Island, Maryland — Patuxent Seafood Company

Andy's oyster farm has been a part of his family for more than 6 generations. He and his wife now operate the farm, he shares how his family was one of the first to own a private lease. The lease he owns is well over 100 years old, and is a bottom base lease. Once handed down, they turned it also into a commercial lease. Which is unique because they can sell oysters in the summer (season closed after April), for those who only have commercial leases, but since they're both private and commercial they have the option to do that. Andy shared that the commercial aquaculture industry in his area is only roughly 12 years old.

They farm both, wild stock and farm grown oysters along with blue crabs, both hard and soft sell industry. We learned a lot about the blue crab soft sell industry and were able to hear how it is done and monitored. (Crazy!). Andy mentioned they have to check soft crab live wells and they catch them when they're close to molting and monitor them in the live well, and once they start molting and have their soft shell, they are removed from the tank immediately and brought to the freezer. This process is really intensive, and requires checking the live well every 2 hours around the clock.

As for the oysters, Andy says they longline their cages, and do not do any tumbling. The longling method was a new method that Dain and I got to learn about. Andy's lease is 15 acres and only about 12 feet deep. So the cages he uses sit on the bottom floor, but not directly on the 'floor' to say. Which they pull in a longline method or fashion.

Their operation is located all on their property right next to the Putuxent River. It's beautiful, and has been passed down for generations. Andy and his wife have 10 grandchildren and they hope to continue the family legacy and pass it down to one of them one day.

At their farm, his farm has up to a million oysters in it at anytime, andy receives roughly 250,000 thousand seed every Spring (says the bag he receives of baby oysters is about the size of a cantaloupe) and puts them directly into upweller that is located directly on his property next to their dock.

They have a 40 ft boat that is docked up and use that to get to and from the farm. He showed us his lease by just pointing, and saying "you see those buoys" that's where our farm is. Their markets were interesting, as they also shuck and canned their oysters on site (a first for dain and I to see!) and sold them by the quart and by the jar. They're able to get cheap jars through the Amish, which the Amish are also able to print on the lids for them, which was also really cool! He shared that the Amish were the cheapest to purchase jars and lids from as they get truck loads they purchase for themselves and resell often.

On their property, they also had on site sales and a cooler system with a kitchen. Outside of the building, is a small fiberglass food trailer that they use in the summer to sell steamed oysters, and crab. He also said all the cage oysters were sold wholesale in large numbers to certain buyers and the locals preferred the wild oysters that were a lot bigger. The wild oysters had a much thicker shell and were easily opened from the side instead of the back hinge. He said in the winter they would pay a diver to go out and harvest the wild oysters similar to the way our seacucumber and geoduck divers do in Alaska. Swim around in the lease and hand pick the oysters, putting them in bags and hoisting them on the boat. The divers had wetsuits that pump hot water through them so the divers stay nice and warm in the frigid water.

We bought and ate a bunch of his wild harvest oysters. And though they were very good, they were huge. I thought I was going to choke on a few of them. Now I see why a bunch of the older folk back east pan fry them and make oyster pies, which is also weird. Maranda tried oyster pie while in Maryland. Meeting with Andy was a great end to the trip to see the difference of a southern farm compared to a northern farm. I'm glad we took them time to visit both areas of the east coast because they were very different.

We ended up buying a half bushel of wild oysters off Andy and headed towards our friends' place to stay for the night. We planned for our last night to do an oyster roast and eat these fresh oysters! We were sooo very surprised by the cost of the half bushel. Andy was very generous and gave us much more than a bushel but we only paid roughly \$45 for well over 100 oysters. Completely different from what we sell our oysters for in the Southeast, that's for sure.

December 16: Laundry Day and Packing

After several long days on the road, we finally slept in and took some time to recharge. We stopped at a family friend's home to store our oysters and get some laundry done. That evening, we had a final oyster feed, savoring the fruits of our East Coast trip before preparing for the drive and travel back home.

December 17: Seattle – Taylor Shellfish Oyster Bar

We returned our rental car and made our way to Seattle, hoping to visit the Taylor Shellfish Samish Oyster Bar and Shellfish Market location. Unfortunately, the road to that location was closed due to flooding. Undeterred, we visited the Taylor Shellfish Oyster Bar in the city and enjoyed our first oyster platter there, it was exceptional. The bar offered oyster shucking while you watched, and the platter included Olympia oysters, which Dain tried for the first time, as well as eight other Pacific oyster varieties from across the West Coast. This visit gave us inspiration for smoked oyster dip for our farm tour and ideas for presentation and shucking demonstrations back home.

December 18: Travel Day Home

We concluded our trip and headed home, full of new ideas, experiences, and memories from the East Coast and West Coast oyster scenes.