

**St. George Island Visitor Center
2A East Gulf Beach Drive
St. George Island, FL 32328**

850.927.7744

888.927.7744 (Toll Free)

www.seestgeorgeisland.com

info@seestgeorgeisland.com

NO LIFE FOR WIMPS

Oysters Can Only be Harvested Manually

While traversing the new St. George Island Bridge in Franklin County take a glimpse at the Bay and you'll likely see several dozen small boats dotting the landscape. No, they aren't recreational fishing vessels. They're specially designed or individually modified oyster boats. Usually with a small protective cubicle used when an oysterman needs to slip away from the blazing mid-day sun and a "culling board" that is needed in order to separate the legal size oysters from their not-so-big buddies.

No mechanical device can be used during the harvesting of oysters. The boat is anchored over an oyster bed and the harvester must now use a sturdy (as in heavy), long-handled (usually 12 foot) device (best described as a "rake") to separate the ultimate target from the rest of the clinging congregation. The contents of the metal two-sided rake portion of the device are then poured out on the culling board. The harvester then uses a special oyster knife to separate the "clump." Legal oysters are kept and the smaller "culls" are tossed back in the water.

Only a small percentage of the smaller oysters are allowed to be present in a sixty-pound oyster sack. It is called a tolerance level. The tossing of the rejects back into the water is also a most important procedure. The smaller bi-valves are allowed to grow up while the discarded empty shells provide a hard surface that baby "spats" can adhere to and complete their life cycle.

The harvesting of oysters is certainly not for wimps.

When you find out how little money an oysterman actually earns for that 60-pound sack you'll be glad you became a butcher, baker or candlestick maker. Oystermen often labor in pairs (many husband/wife teams) so divide the approximate \$25 in half.

Most of the harvesters work for local seafood dealers. Some of them own their own boat and equipment while others needed the loan of a boat in order to get started in the business. Some of the more proficient harvesters are under contract to specific restaurants in the area and sell their "catch" exclusively to those eateries. Obviously, since "presentation" is everything, a bag of quite sizable cup oysters earns better bucks.

There are about 1,200 licensed oystermen in Franklin County. They pay for their license and attend classes. They are monitored (by the Florida Wildlife Patrol) both on the water and when bringing their bounty to the dealer.

Still want to try your hand at being an oyster harvester? Ok, there's a local company that will take you out on Apalachicola Bay and you can try your hand at being a recreational harvester. Yep, you can stand at the side of the boat; rake up your own personal clump of bi-valves; and then cull away. Or better still, you can take that lazy teenage son of yours (who thinks making riding mower crop circles on your front lawn is mighty tough work) on the adventure and teach him what hard work is really all about.

Not all 1,200 licensed Franklin County harvesters are active at the same time. For an estimated 200 to 300 it is their primary source of income. Others do it when the going gets tough and baby needs a new pair of shoes. The oyster "fleet" stays moored all along the Franklin County coast. On St. George Island you can see several dozen of the vessels positioned along the "boat ramp" on the east side of the foot of the bridge.

At Least 80% of the oysters consumed in Florida are harvested from the waters off St. George Island. Possibly some 20% of the nation's supply. Yes, the consumption of raw (uncooked) oysters remains somewhat controversial. Controversial mainly because already ill people have absolutely no business eating any meat that is uncooked. For those people we strongly advise having your oysters prepared one of a dozen different (cooked) ways. For the rest of us, a couple dozen topless treats and a pitcher of cold brew is one of life's true pleasures. But be warned: this should only be done on days ending in the letter "Y."