

Oysters Available For Holiday Tables

KEVIN MCGILL, Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Tradition will hold for Cajun chef John Folsé this Thanksgiving.

"I'm confident enough that I've got a big ol' pot of oyster dressing going right now," Folsé said, when asked about the availability of Gulf of Mexico oysters more than two years after the BP oil spill — and months after Hurricane Isaac raked the Louisiana coast.

During the spill, authorities diverted fresh water into some of south Louisiana's coastal oyster-growing areas in hopes of keeping the oil at bay. The problem, oyster industry leaders have said, is that the diversion diluted the salinity of the water and harmed the crop. Isaac caused further problems, forcing precautionary shutdowns of some areas in the fall to guard against pollution whipped up by the slow-moving storm.

But Mike Voisin, head of a family-owned oyster-processing business in Terrebonne Parish and a member of Louisiana's wildlife commission, said enough areas have opened up in recent weeks, in Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, to meet demand.

"There should be ample oysters available for the Thanksgiving and holiday season," said Voisin.

The news isn't universally good.

"I don't know who's saying they've got plenty and all that. Good luck to them," said Al Sunseri, who with his brother Sal runs P&J Oyster Co. in New Orleans' French Quarter. Their main suppliers were hit hard by the spill, leading to layoffs of the dozen employees who spent early morning shucking fresh oysters. Now, Sunseri says, the business mainly distributes processed oysters from Texas, western Louisiana waters or Alabama.

Statistics released in September by the National Marine Fisheries Service showed 17.1 million pounds of Gulf oysters harvested in 2011, up from 15.8 million in 2010, the year of the spill, but below the 22.8 million of 2009. More than 60 percent of the Gulf oysters came from Louisiana waters.

"Overall, production is down in the Gulf. We expect that to turn around in the next year and the year after that," Voisin said.

In Alabama, Chris Blankenship, director of the state's Marine Resources Division at Dauphin Island, Ala., said the harvest began last month and is going well. Alabama oyster harvesters had their problems, too, in recent years — not because of the oil spill but because of a predatory snail that forced closure of the reef in 2009 and

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Blankenship said that's not a problem now. "There are plenty of oysters," he said Tuesday.

Grocers interviewed in recent days say they have enough oysters on hand to meet demands of home cooks who want to serve up their special dressing that is a staple on Louisiana holiday tables.

"The oyster harvest is plentiful enough for everybody to get supply right now," said James Breuhl, seafood director for Rouse's, a south Louisiana grocery chain.

"Coming off of Isaac, I anticipated that the oyster supply would get a little scarce," said Marc Robert (ROH' behr), who oversees perishable foods for his family's Robert Fresh Market chain. "But come to find out we really haven't seen a whole lot of shock to the market."

Prices vary but they can be steep, \$20 or more for a quart. But they have stabilized over the last couple of years, Voisin and the grocers said.

Folse said he is happy with the availability and the quality of the Louisiana oyster crop so far. He speaks ecstatically about the salinity and flavor of the current crop and describes a classic oyster stew he's preparing for Revolution, the French Quarter Cajun and Creole restaurant he owns with chef Rich Tramonto.

"I think that people are going to be excited about the quality of them," Folse said. "I just hope that people aren't so excited about them that we run out of the supply."

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Associated Press reporter Jay Reeves in Alabama contributed to this story.

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