New Trail Connects Visitors to Virginia Oysters

MICHAEL FELBERBAUM, AP Business Writer

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Riding a wave of growth and popularity of the state's aquaculture, Virginia officials on Tuesday announced the creation of the Virginia Oyster Trail to connect travelers to the state's oyster industry.

The industry that dates to the founding of Jamestown in 1607 is enjoying it largest harvest since 1987 and hoping to propel Virginia's briny bivalves into the global spotlight. The newly launched trail links visitors with Virginia oyster purveyors, and restaurants, raw bars and the long-standing watermen culture throughout the Northern Neck, Middle Peninsula and Virginia's Eastern Shore.

"From briny to mild, oysters have been bringing local flavor to Virginia since the first inhabitants harvested them from our waters," Gov. Terry McAuliffe said at an event announcing the trail at the Executive Mansion in Richmond that paired Virginia oysters and wine. "They are a terrific item in the world seafood market and they serve an invaluable function of filtering the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries."

Virginia's seven different oyster regions produce the largest amount of wild-caught and farm-raised oysters in the U.S., bringing the industry back from "almost total collapse," McAuliffe said.

Last year, the state's harvest increased 25 percent to more than 500,000 bushels and a dockside value of more than $22 million. Just 12 years ago, Virginia's oyster harvest was only about 23,000 bushels.

According to the Virginia Marine Resource Commission, the state has nearly 650 licensed oyster fishermen, more than 540 licensed oyster aquaculturists and more than 30 licensed oyster shucking houses.

The success has contributed to Virginia becoming the leading East Coast producer of seafood and the third-largest in the nation, officials said.

"People are eating more (oysters) year-round. They're enjoying them all the time and they're getting into it," said Patrick Oliver, farm manager of the Rappahannock River Oyster Co., a century-old family business that was resurrected in 2002 by the founder's great grandsons Ryan and Travis Croxton. The business now includes restaurants in its headquarters of Topping, Richmond and Washington, D.C.

Growth of Virginia oysters also has helped bolster other businesses, such as the wine industry in Virginia, which is home to more than 250 wineries and is fifth in the nation for wine grape production.

"It's really huge what the impact has been economic development wise,

environmentally, culinary," said Dudley Patteson, who purchased a winery in Irvington three years ago and rebranded the vineyard as The Dog and Oyster with the intention of creating wines specifically to pair with oysters. "No one had really claimed the oyster as their own ... and you have all sorts of tie-ins (in Virginia)."

Source URL (retrieved on *10/23/2014 - 5:05am*):
http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/08/new-trail-connects-visitors-virginia-oysters