

Hollander & de Koning makes mussel farming a family enterprise with an international flair

By

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Published on
April 18, 2017

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Fiona de Koning is the co-owner, business manager and head of sales for family-run Hollander & de Koning Mussel Farms, a bottom cultivation operation in Trenton, Maine. Theo de Koning, Fiona's husband, is a fifth-generation mussel farmer from the Netherlands, who also serves as co-owner, boat captain and farm manager. Sons Alex and Max represent the sixth generation. Alex serves as the company's processing manager, development engineer and head of quality control; Max is a trainee boat captain and part of the processing plant crew.

SeafoodSource: What are the core tenets of your company's business strategy and how do you feel this foundation guides your business moving forward?

De Koning: Our company aims to provide high-quality, sustainably grown mussels to our select customers with consistency of supply and great customer service. We have found the good reputation and trust that develops over time creates a partnership with our customers that is valuable to their needs and ours. Honesty and integrity define the

conversations and have enabled us to grow steadily and strategically. We have a farming technique (bottom-cultivated versus rope grown) that although it is the gold standard in Europe, is unique to the United States. Thus, we are able to offer our customers something a little bit different from what is otherwise available.

SeafoodSource: Talk about the dynamics of being a family-run business and how that impacts operations, planning for the future and so on.

De Koning: To be successful as a family-owned and -run business, you have to be good at maintaining strong relationships. This skill has proved to be invaluable when applied to our customer service. There is a continuity that comes from the generational nature of our business and the fact that we are all deeply invested in what we do. Aquaculture is by nature a long-term commitment and the bonds that exist when operated by a family are well-suited to this kind of business.

SeafoodSource: Maine is obviously known for lobster. How do you build that same recognition and excitement for Maine-grown mussels?

De Koning: The Maine brand is strong because of the excellence of the growing conditions for seafood in the pristine waters on the coast of Maine. We consider ourselves to be ambassadors of that brand with our mussels. The lobster industry in Maine has a reputation for being well-managed and of high quality.



We are committed to high sustainability and quality standards that are above what is required by regulation. As the aquaculture sector grows, we expect to position ourselves alongside the Maine lobster as part of the dynamic and expanding aquaculture sector. There is an opportunity to increase the volume of seafood production as a state with valuable and respected products from Maine.

SeafoodSource: What do you see as your company's greatest achievement thus far?

De Koning: Our greatest achievement is to have started this farming business 10 years ago with just three members of the family with fingers crossed and sleeves rolled up, ready for work. We have progressed from a small start-up to a company with significant sales and market penetration, without having compromised our quality or "hands on" approach. We have grown to the point where we built a new processing facility last year with many state-of-the-art pieces of equipment. The love of farming and sharing the wonderful flavors of mussels from Maine is a great way to earn a living. We eat our mussels every week and it is satisfying to know that so many others can now enjoy them as well.

SeafoodSource: What sustainability practices do you adhere to and why is this important to your business?

De Koning: Theo is originally from the Netherlands and his family has been farming mussels, using basically the same technique, since the 1700s. The environmental standards required by the Dutch government are strict and because the mussel farming sector is much larger there than here in the United States, many of the Dutch regulations are adapted to mussel culture specifically. We have taken many of those standards and applied them to our operation. The volume of cultivated mussel production in Maine has been a limiting factor so far, for the amount of time focused by the state on mussel management. We have been leading the way in these efforts for the past 10 years.

We are collaborating with state regulators and other interested stakeholders to continue to bring good scientific management into the mussel sector as a whole. Theo was part of a national think-tank on mussel management in the Netherlands and continues to stay up to date with developments there so we can apply any new information here. I serve on state shellfish and aquaculture advisory councils and am a board member of the Maine Aquaculture Association. I was also part of the Global Aquaculture Alliance's committee that developed the standards for their mollusk Best Aquaculture Practices certification program. Sustainable practices are important for many reasons: It is the right thing to do, it creates opportunity for future generations, it is becoming more important than ever in the market, it is best for farm production efficiency and is treating the environment and our direct neighbors with respect.

SeafoodSource: If you could change one thing about the seafood industry (or specifically the mussel industry) as it stands now, what would that be?

De Koning: I would like there to be more opportunity for education of customers with regard to the differences between mussels on the market and how they are produced. It would be helpful if we could be sure as domestic producers that we are being compared using identical standards to any imported seafood.

SeafoodSource: What impact do you see the Trump administration and its policies having on the seafood industry?

De Koning: As a business that depends on being good stewards of our environment, strong and sensible policies regarding the many environmental threats are crucial.

SeafoodSource: Are there particular things you would like to see federal, state or local governments doing to help and support the seafood (or specifically the mussel) industry?

De Koning: We need thoughtful, practical and adaptive regulations that are focused on long-term management rather than knee-jerk responses to the most recent hot topic.

SeafoodSource: What has been the best piece of business advice you have been given and by whom?



De Koning: The best piece of advice we received was to grow the company carefully and strategically and to never give up. This advice has been passed down from the previous generations of farmers in the family. We are in this for the very long-term.

- See more at: https://www.seafoodsource.com/seafood-business-insider/hollander--de-koning-makes-mussel-farming-a-family-enterprise-with-an-international-flair?utm_source=informz&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter&utm_content=newsletter#sthash.MogjuEGW.dpuf