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Buy-valves: Massachusetts farmers grow online oyster business

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By Lauren Kramer

Fish 2.0 winners Real Oyster Cult tightens consumers' connection to the sea



Rob Knecht and Sims McCormick, co-founders of Real Oyster Cult, an online business that ships oysters from 70 farms direct to consumers.

Oyster farmers Rob Knecht and Sims McCormick opted to cut out middlemen and wholesalers with **Real Oyster Cult** (<https://realoystercult.com/>), their fledgling online oyster business, and deliver their briny shellfish direct from farm to consumer.

Five months in they've shipped close to 500 boxes (containing 20 to 100 oysters each) to 46 different states. When they walked off with a \$5,000 prize after pitching their business to investors at **Fish 2.0** (<https://www.aquaculturealliance.org/advocate/fish-2-0-aquaculture-innovators/>), (for a New England seafood business with high potential for scalability and a strong branding strategy), it was the ultimate recognition that they're on the right track.

"We work seven days a week on this business and it's nice to get recognition from the industry that validates what we're doing and how we're doing it," Knecht told the *Advocate*. "That was even more important than the \$5,000!"

Knecht began farming oysters when he and his wife bought Sailor's Bay Oyster Farm in Duxbury, Mass., in 2009, and has since spent the last eight years reflecting on the supply chain and his oysters' end destination. Their customers were mostly wholesalers, who held a lot of sway in where the product ended up.

"We had friends who owned restaurants and were excited to get our product, but at certain times of year they couldn't get it, even though we had plenty to sell," he said. "We found it frustrating that our wholesalers were dictating supply and demand. And we'd heard stories about some wholesalers taking product and trying to sell it under a different brand name, which creates traceability and transparency issues."

The idea for Real Oyster Cult emerged from the couple's shared love of oysters.

"We celebrate with oysters all the time and wanted to be able to give that experience to everyone, not just with our own oysters but with oysters from all over America," McCormick said.



Rob Knecht delivered an energetic pitch at the Fish 2.0 Innovation Forum last month in Palo Alto, Calif. Photo courtesy of Fish 2.0.

Together Knecht and McCormick raised \$130,000 from friends and family and spent nine months developing an app and website for Real Oyster Cult. They used social media and a luxury gift box partnership with Robb Vices to publicize their company, and since inception they've been shipping high quality oysters from some 70 different oyster farmers directly to consumers throughout the United States. The oysters are delivered to Real Oyster Cult's Boston facility and are then shipped to their end destination via FedEx in an insulated, cold package outfitted with a temperature sensor.

"We rotate through three to five different oysters per week on our website and app, and each week we highlight one new oyster farmer and post information about their story, where we talk up their product," McCormick said. Their suppliers welcome the exposure and for some, it's generated new business.

"We've had one or two farmers tell us that they've had restaurants requesting their oysters after customers tried them through our online delivery, so this is helping their farms get more traction with restaurants," she added.

Ben Lloyd, owner of Standish Shore Oysters in Duxbury, Mass., is one of Real Oyster Cult's suppliers.

"We sell most of our oysters through our own wholesale company but supplying to Real Oyster Cult has diversified our customer base and given us another outlet in a different market," he said. "It allows us to reach the end user directly, and the feedback we've received from people enjoying our oysters has been very validating."

Distributors sell Lloyd's oysters to restaurants in various states, but usually, there's no feedback. That changed with Real Oyster Cult, when Knecht started forwarded positive comments from customers about Stand Ashore Oysters directly to him. Lloyd said Real Oyster Cult's network represents only a small percentage of business, but anticipated it would increase over the next year.

"It's nice to have another outlet for our oysters and to deliver to different demographics," he said.

For consumers, the experience of having oysters shipped to their doorstep is highly personal.

"We send our customers a personal email with recipes and a video teaching them how to shuck, and the oysters come with a nice card. We have a dialogue with them throughout the process," explained McCormick. "Most of our customers have never eaten oysters at home before, so it's an adventure for them, and they tell us about it. Getting oysters shipped to your door feels more exciting than going out to the grocery store and buying them. So all these things combined make Real Oyster Cult cool and unique."

Knecht and McCormick hope to ship to customers in Canada in the near future and are looking at a direct-to-chef delivery model for early 2018. The pair was actively scouting Fish 2.0 for the right investment partner.

"We're looking for someone who believes in our vision, the impact and sustainability of what we're doing," Knecht said. "We're blazing a new trail here with the oyster experience. We're following the explosive growth trend created by meal kits like Blue Apron, which has been instrumental on an experiential and educational front too. This is an exciting time and we hope to grow exponentially in the future."

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Rob Knecht and Sims McCormick said the validation that came from being named a winner at Fish 2.0 was worth a lot more than the \$5,000 cash prize that came with it.

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