

Oyster farmer Andrew Carmines culls wild oysters along the marsh, leaving the habitat in place for larval oysters to attach.



MAKE A COASTAL LIVING

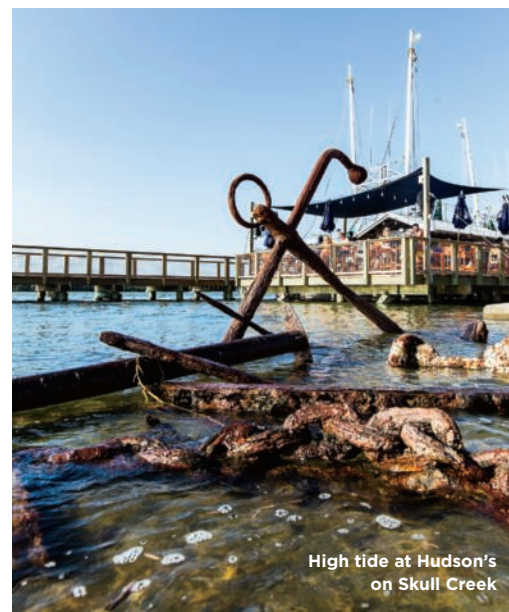
THE RESTAURATEUR TURNED SEAFOOD FARMER

How Hilton Head native Andrew Carmines took the food-sourcing model of his family's decades-old dockside restaurant and flipped it on its head

BY LAUREN PHILLIPS PHOTOGRAPHS BY GATELY WILLIAMS



Carmines's family has owned Hudson's since 1975.



High tide at Hudson's on Skull Creek



Carmines with wife Erin, daughters Alice (6) and Milly (4), and son Oak (2)

A

Andrew Carmines grew up checking in shrimp deliveries and bussing tables at his parents' seafood restaurant, a busy dockside haunt on Hilton Head Island, South Carolina. The place already had a long history: Carmines's parents bought Hudson's Seafood House on the Docks in 1975, but the building had opened in 1912 as a seafood-processing plant. "A lot of oysters came through here," says Carmines, who left the island for college and then a career in hospitality in California before moving back home in 2006 to work at Hudson's. "My dad had said to me, 'Look, what do you want to do? Because if you're not interested in doing something with the restaurant, we're probably going to sell it.' And I thought, 'Over my dead body.'" His return was as much the beginning of a new legacy as it was a continuation of the old; Carmines began looking into creative ways to ensure that, as often as possible, the seafood Hudson's serves has spent mere hours out of the water, not days. What began with striking deals with shrimpers grew into shedding out soft-shell crabs on-site and forming a side business, Shell Ring Oyster Company, to farm his own oysters—and Carmines is just getting started. Here's more on how he's forging a new future for his family's iconic waterfront business.

What was it like starting work at the restaurant you grew up in?

Andrew Carmines: I started out as an entry-level manager, at the bottom of the management rung, and worked my way up to GM [general manager] in 2011. And then we started getting crazy with all the other stuff—that's when the fun really started.

What kinds of changes did you make?

AC: We decided we were going to shift the paradigm away from bulk ordering—a lot of products we were using were completely foreign to me—and look at new ways to find the freshest seafood we could. For instance, we struck a deal with the shrimpers who used the docks at Hudson's: On

the last 24 hours of their trips, they would fish exclusively for us. It's essentially the only shrimp we buy at the dock now, so most of the shrimp we serve has been out of the water for less than 24 hours during the season.

And that experience prompted your experiment with soft-shell crabs?

AC: Yes. When you order some soft-shell crabs, they have a real papery consistency when you bite into them because the shell has started to re-harden a little bit. Their producers will let them sit in the water for a little while so that the shell will harden up and they'll travel better. But we thought, what if they don't have to travel? We decided to shed out soft-shell crabs on premises. We

Carmine cruises through Port Royal Sound to work his cultivated oysters and check stone-crab pots.



Checking a freshly harvested oyster to see how it has matured



Hudson's local oysters, steamed dayboat shrimp, and pan-roasted local swordfish



Shrimp boat *Catina Renea* docked at the Hudson's open-air bar and dining room

put live female crabs into tanks that have two pool pumps bringing salt water from the creek in through the filtering system. Then we watch them 24 hours a day until they shed out of their shells, and then we serve them. They're much better that way.

Oyster farming was next?

AC: The first year we did the soft-shell crabs, we didn't have a staff to help shed them out, so I was running the restaurant by day and watching the crabs several nights a week. Getting toward the end of the season, Rob Roe—who is a big part of the Shell Ring Oyster Company—and I were joking around at 3 o'clock in the morning, and Rob said, "What are we going to do when the season is over and we don't have to stay up 24 hours a day and watch soft-shell crabs?" And I said, "Well, why don't we try to grow oysters?" I think shedding out the soft-shell crabs was a big confidence booster.

How difficult was starting out as an oyster farmer?

AC: It's definitely a challenge. I always say there's a reason everybody doesn't do it, and it's because there's a lot of heartache that goes with it. We're babies in the industry—the learning curve was steep, and it's all trial and error. There's no book for how to grow oysters on Hilton Head Island—you have to go off of what other people have done in other places and try to go your own way, in some respects. But we learned quickly: Our first year, we grew a lot of oysters and picked a lot of oysters; I think we sold 90,000 oysters in three months at the restaurant. In the slowest time of the year at Hudson's—November, December, January—we went through roughly 1,000 oysters a day. In the summer, that would be an

accomplishment, but in the winter, it was huge.

What inspired the name Shell Ring Oyster Company?

AC: Native Americans once built settlements on Hilton Head. They were hunter-gatherers, and nobody really knows why, but they left giant rings behind: piles of oyster shells in a circle. These tribes lived here thousands and thousands of years ago, and ate a lot of oysters. I thought it would be really cool to pay homage to the first oyster eaters. There's a lot of history here, and anytime we can point to that and stay true to our roots, that's something we're really keen on.

What about the challenges of operating a business on the coast, in terms of storms? Most recently, the storm surge from Hurricane Irma forced you to close for several days.

AC: Yes, and the year before, we lost about 70 percent of our shell stock to Hurricane Matthew. We took a really big hit. The restaurant was almost destroyed. We lost all of our docks and a huge percentage of our oysters. Fortunately, our staff at the restaurant stepped up and basically put the restaurant back together. We worked 60 people 12 hours a day for three weeks and got the restaurant reopened, even though we still had a lot of damage to the docks.

How do you balance it all?

AC: Knowing where to put my time is the hardest part. Paying attention to the restaurant is huge, because it's a family business and it generates more revenue than the oysters. But if we want to grow the oyster company, I'm going to have to step back from the restaurant and work on that. We're weighing the options to see what way we want to go.

Was there any negative feedback when you started?

AC: Yes—some longtime customers thought I was just jacking up the prices. We were barely sliding by those first couple of years. It was a big leap of faith.

Did you ever wonder if you'd made a mistake?

AC: My parents and I had some heated conversations. I said, "I know this is going to work; if we do things right, people will come." And it really worked. I'm hoping it continues to pay off. We've had a lot of success with improving the quality and the freshness of the products we're serving and producing those ourselves. It's made customers very loyal, and they're really interested in what we're doing, which is great. And as we get better at producing and harvesting these products, it makes financial sense, as well.

Are your parents still involved?

AC: My dad is my chief advisor. Anytime I have a problem or a question, we'll go fishing or hunting and talk about it. Usually I'm on the right track, but it's always nice to run ideas past him because he's been through it all here. My mom is great—she helps with all kinds of stuff. I think they're really enjoying watching the restaurant succeed without having to be here every day.

Do you think any of your children will follow in your footsteps?

AC: I think that option will be there, but it'll be a matter of whether they want to do it or not. I would never pressure them into doing it. It's not for everyone. The restaurant and the seafood businesses are really tough. It's a lot of hours and a lot of hard work. You have to love it.