

OVER THE LAST FEW WEEKS, Tommy Ward has been losing the battle to maintain production levels and keep his business chugging along. His son decided to take two of the five family boats out to work for BP. The money helps, but Tommy doesn't like it. He just wants to do what he loves and keep the oystering way of life alive.

"What do you do? You've got customers what you've had for thirty years. You struggle and ease along with the little product that you're getting in to save some of your major accounts, you know, that have been with you for years."

Tommy realizes there are other places in the world to buy oysters. If his customers are forced to go elsewhere, he knows it could be an uphill battle to get the business back later, even if the oyster bars stay perfectly clean.

But what if they don't stay clean? As of early July, Apalachicola Bay is pristine, but oil lurks only twenty miles west of here.

I ask Johnny if he has thought about what he will do if he can't fish anymore. He pauses. "Not really. I'm just about the age now that no one would want to hire me." He pauses again. "I hadn't thought about what I'd do if I wasn't fishing."

In the last five years, the people on the Gulf have lived through so much. Hurricanes Katrina, Dennis, and Ivan. Drought and recession. Insurance companies that were slow or reluctant to settle claims. Competition from cheap seafood imports. High gas prices that made fishing runs cost-prohibitive. And now, the biggest oil spill in American history.

As of this printing, that damn well is still gushing oil. With no end in sight. These people are tired.

"It's their way of life. You're taking away a way of life from a bunch of people," Tommy says tearfully. He takes a few deep breaths and utters simply, "Families."

I ask Tommy if he has anything to say about what the future holds. He manages a smile and shakes his head. "We've never faced anything like this before. I don't have a clue what to do. I don't think anybody else does, either."



A CREATIVE MIND
Full of Ideas for the Future
New Orleans, Louisiana

RICHARD MCCARTHY is the executive director of Market Umbrella, a New Orleans-based, not-for-profit champion of ecologically friendly and economically sustainable public markets. In 2003, Market Umbrella founded the White Boot Brigade—named in honor of the ubiquitous white rubber boots worn by fishermen—to promote a new model of seafood sales. The Brigade helps independent fishermen follow the farmers market, sea-to-consumer business model.

Despite the fact that Richard's home state is the hardest hit by the oil spill, in a recent interview, I found him to be remarkably buoyant about the future. In a region where so many are understandably paralyzed by uncertainty, Richard churns out ideas with inspiring confidence.

“We’re in perilous waters—economically, ecologically, you name it,” Richard says. “But as depressed and worried as I am, I’m also hopeful. There will be food again coming out of the Gulf.”

According to Richard, there still is food coming out of the Gulf. But, due to water closures, the torrent of shrimp, oysters, and fish that usually flows from Louisiana’s waters has slowed to a trickle. “Our situation right now is that we have many, many more fishermen harvesting a much, much smaller area,” Richard explains.

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“New Orleans is a city that loves its seafood—that is obsessed with its seafood,” he says. “If you have product right now, it sells.” In fact, he sees locals hoarding the dwindling catches, buying in abundance and freezing it. “The fact that we may not have ample supply is creating a great sense of anxiety.”

“New Orleans restaurant chefs have said that weeknights, they’re selling lots of seafood off their menus, and weekends, seafood sales are way down.” The accepted wisdom is that more of their seats on the weekends are filled with tourists, who are afraid of Gulf seafood. But during the week, the locals eat it up.

“The brand of Gulf Coast seafood is so badly tarnished by the oil. It’s going to be very difficult to make the case that it’s okay,” he concedes. “There’s going to need to be a great deal of work to convince consumers to come back to the coast.”

The first step could be what Richard calls a “Shuck and Awe” public relations campaign, fixed on convincing chefs and consumers nationwide to trust the quality of Gulf seafood. But in Richard’s mind, that would be just the beginning.

“This is a teachable moment,” Richard says. “We use disaster as opportunity.”

“Whether it’s three months or three years or thirty years, once the oil has been stopped, and the beaches have been cleaned, and we know what we’re dealing with, we can use creativity and ingenuity and

build on the lines of solidarity between folks who like to harvest the food and those like to eat the food.”

“Move the fishermen from the industrial to the boutique,” he suggests. If you empower fishermen to fish naturally and sustainably, they can then turn around and sell their catch direct to quality-conscious consumers, capitalizing on scarcity, niche, and seasonality—as farmers, cheesemakers, and vigneron do.

“I think it’s an unbelievable opportunity to look into AOC certification,” he says, referring to the European practice of honoring the terroir of a foodstuff by legally codifying its provenance and production methods.

If this comes to pass, American consumers might one day honor Lake Pontchartrain shrimp and Apalachicola oysters as the French now honor Cavaillon melons or Châteauneuf-du-Pape wines. “We can really reinforce the taste of place more than just ‘Gulf Coast.’ I can get excited about eating a place,” Richard says.

“I don’t think this is going to be the end,” Richard asserts. “In this slowing down, there’s going to be great opportunity.”

PAGE 13: Richard McCarthy is the executive director of Market Umbrella. BELOW: The White Boot Brigade, a project founded by Market Umbrella, aims to link small fishermen directly to consumers, farmers market-style.

