Ferda Farms: From Oysters to Seaweed

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Harvesting at Ferda Farms.

by Robin G. Coles

Father and son are moving from farming oysters to seaweed.

In 2018, at 18 years old, Max Burtis, of Brunswick, Maine and a few of his high school friends decided to start an oyster farm. They got the idea while digging clams in high school through a student clam digging program. The only problem they had was in high school they had a student license. Now they needed a different type of license. So, Max approached his father, Chris Burtis, who had experience working commercially on oyster farms, in raw bars, and on the water his whole life. Luckily, his father liked the idea. They started out small and chose their business name "**Ferda Farms**".

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This name comes from the slang version “ferda” meaning “for the boys” because of their love for hockey. Since then, Max’s friends/business partners moved on to other adventures and today it’s a family business with Max and Chris as co-founders.

Now, at age 23, Max knows all too well what it takes to run a family business. He’s had to put his college course work on hold while taking care of the farm full-time due to his father going through some medical procedures. “I’m finding it a bit more interesting,” says Max. “I’m doing more business management than I expected.”

According to Max, a typical day might start off the morning with a meeting around 7am. He’ll have a conversation with his crew about what they’re going to do for the day, then gear up for going out, maybe even harvesting, sorting or culling oysters. They tend to get back around 3pm to the dock. If they’re harvesting oysters he might be back around noon and then go deliver oysters down in Portland. Once the work on the water and the deliveries are done, he puts his business administrator hat on to get the paperwork finished.

> **“We hope to have our first batch of Kelp by Spring 2025, though Spring 2026 feels more realistic.”**

“I’m also actively digging clams commercially in June, July and August,” says Max. “If that’s the case I usually meet up with my crew either before or after digging the clams.”

Now that we’re coming up to the colder winter months it’s time to start preparing the oysters. At the end of December, the crew will pull out the oysters that are ready to stop feeding and prepare those that are ready for sale. The

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oysters not ready for sale will be put into lobster crates and sunk to the bottom. In April, they'll start bringing the oysters back up to the shore, feed them again and get back into the growing season.

Fifty percent of their oyster customers are distributors. Forty percent are seafood markets and 10% is direct to consumer. As we were talking Max was dropping off 1000 oysters at a Portland, ME fish exchange. From there, the oysters will go to Boston's fishing pier.

Selling clams is different. "I'll go and sell at a seafood market similar to a wholesale clam buyer," says Max. "I'll sell every day whatever I harvested that day, even if I come in with 400 pounds of clams that day. They buy it all."

"Going Big on Seaweed"

When asked if he was looking to get into seaweed farming, he said yes. "Rather than start out small," says Max, "I'm looking to just go big right away and then take my time doing it while I wait for permits, etc. I'm thinking in terms of scale. Eight to 10 acres would probably be good." He wants to harvest at least 75,000 pounds which, he says, is currently the threshold of profitability.

Seaweed farming will be in conjunction with the oyster farm even if it means creating an umbrella company and making a new entity for the kelp farm. "Doing this will hopefully get my brother, Isaac, back involved," says Max. Isaac was there at the beginning and was willing to put in the applications, but he needed help because he didn't have any experience in aquaculture.

Both Max and Chris helped Isaac and seeded out 1600 feet of coastline. They farmed it all summer long while Isaac

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went to work on another woman's farm for the experience. There was a lot of interest from local restaurants to buy their seaweed. Unfortunately, Covid hit hard right when it was time to harvest the kelp and none of the restaurants were open for business.

Finding Programs for Planning and Funding

Research is an integral part of the process and according to Max he's taking full advantage of the various programs in Maine. To date, he's hired someone to do the research, technical assistance funding, hired a grant writer, and both an engineer and oceanographer to do some work. All this is for the highlight site reviews so they know where to put the kelp farm, how to design it, and use the space efficiently.

Other programs they've connected with are for business planning and funding. These resources are from the **Small Business Development Center** (SBDC) and **Maine Aquaculture Association**, or their trade association that provides consulting for anyone looking to start farms.

In the meantime, the Burtis's have three major steps to complete before they make their first sale:
1. Design the gear to use. Engineers have till December 2023 to get this finished.
2. Apply for the lease. This could take a couple years with costs of $100/acre per year.
3. Look at options to get the seed and where to sell the kelp.

Max realizes the markets are changing right now, including the strains of seeds available when he's ready to buy. Lots of development is going on with high yield strains, localized selective breeding, heat resistance, and heat tolerant

strains, as well as dealing with the warming ocean. “As we get closer to putting gear in the water,” says Max, “we’ll have some clearer answers.”

Chris and Max are hoping to have their first batch of kelp by Spring 2025, though Max says that Spring 2026 is probably more realistic.

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