The old pearl of wisdom that oysters should be reserved for months spelled with an R still has plenty of currency with some connoisseurs. Not so much because of food safety concerns but rather because oysters spawn in the hot (and R-less) summer months, making them thinner and less flavorful.

But this week marks a milestone for a different kind of Louisiana oyster, one that’s been specially bred to stay in prime form during the summer. They’ve been cultivated through an alternate growing method that can produce larger, fatter oysters in local waters.

“You can think of it like a new summer crop,” said John Supan, an oyster specialist with the Louisiana Sea Grant program. “It’s something to switch to for a fat, meaty oyster when normally, oysters will be skinny.”

Although some restaurants have had access to these oysters for years, the Crescent City Farmers Market will offer them to the public for the first time on Saturday. They’ve been grown by Caminada Bay Premium Oysters, a Grand Isle-based firm that has worked closely with state fisheries scientists on the project.

Following Saturday’s market, the company plans to sell the oysters at each of the Crescent City Farmers Market editions through July 25. (See market details at crescentcityfarmersmarket.org.) After that, and depending on supplies, they will use SouthShoreDirectSeafood.com, which is run by Sea Grant and the LSU AgCenter to connect local consumers directly with local seafood.

This new harvest was grown from hybrid seed stock developed by Supan over more than 20 years of research at the oyster hatcheries he has developed in Louisiana.

Caminada Bay Premium Oysters grew the oysters using a method called off-bottom cultivation, which Supan and other fisheries experts have been advocating for years.

Instead of raking up oysters from reefs or the sea bottom in the conventional way, off-bottom systems use enclosures to suspend oysters in the water. Caminada Bay Premium

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**Photos provided by MARCOS GUERRERO**

Oysters grow through off-bottom cultivation from Caminada Bay Premium Oysters, a Grand Isle company now marketing them in New Orleans.
OYSTER

Continued from page 1A

Oyster uses floating cages. The water’s current brings the oysters more nutrients than they would get on the bottom, which helps them grow faster. They develop thinner shells with a deeper cup shape to cradle a larger oyster within.

“If you can imagine a happy oyster, well, these are happy oysters,” said Rusty Gaudé, a Sea Grant agent working on the project.

The enclosures also protect oysters from predators and remove the threat that young oysters will be smothered in mud. As a result, an oyster farmer can count on fewer losses before harvest.

Increasingly common at oyster farms on the West Coast and East Coast, this off-bottom technique is now gaining afoothold along Louisiana’s coast. This week’s farmers’ market events are the first time Louisiana product grown this way has been available to the public in any significant quantity, Gaudé said.

“It’s the next step for our industry,” he said. “It looks like real progress for us, but we’re actually just coming up to speed.”

In addition to the off-bottom growing environment, the new oysters started out from hybrid seed oysters bred to be sterile, which helps account for their summertime appeal.

While traditional oysters spawn in the summer and burrow in the winter fat, these don’t,” Supan said. “So you can get July oysters that look as fat as February oysters.”

He compared them to seedless watermelons. “You really only want those seeds if you’re having a seed-splitting contest,” he said. “If you don’t want them, you’re likely willing to pay a higher price” for seedless melons.

And the new oysters are significantly more expensive than conventionally harvested Louisiana oysters. The technique requires new equipment and presents a more labor-intensive harvest. At the market this week, Caminada Bar Premium Oysters plans to sell boxes of 25 oysters for $25.

“We harvest these by hand; you touch every one of them,” said Marcos Guerrero, who runs Caminada Bar Premium Oysters with his wife and sons.

They plan to harvest about 100,000 of the oysters this year and hope to eventually grow the business to harvest a million oysters per year with off-bottom cultivation.

The product is making its way into a broader market at a time when oyster demand is on the rise, in New Orleans and around the country, but also when Louisiana’s precious oyster industry has been struggling with diminished harvests in the wake of hurricanes and the BP oil spill.

The fisheries scientists say off-bottom cultivation will never replace conventional, bottom-harvest oysters, but they say it offers an alternative with many upsides. It allows oysters to grow in areas where they would not otherwise flourish on the bottom, and oystermen can reap more of the product they sew. They also see the potential to develop more place-specific oyster brands, to differentiate and lift a premium Louisiana oyster above commodity status.

“These aren’t oysters you’d use for chargrilling. These are for the half-shell trade. It’s a connoisseur’s oyster,” Gaudé said. “We’re diversifying our production to make other types of oysters available. We’ve introduced a premium Louisiana oyster above commodity status. There are other premium oysters available from traditional harvest, but this is one that really shines in the summer when others are at seasonal low.”

To Guerrero, it’s a new angle on Louisiana’s traditional oyster business and one where he sees opportunity.

“In the future, I think you’ll see many different farms, so you could fill a plate with different oysters like this from different areas of Louisiana,” he said.

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