



RICHARDS  
AT WORK

## Keeping at Bay

Traditional craftsman Rodney Richards carries the torch for Apalachicola's famed oysters

BY T.S. STRICKLAND

**FLORIDA'S APALACHICOLA** is an oyster town. It's the type of place where people eat shellfish omelets for breakfast, name their daughters "Pearl," and learn to shuck before they can ride a bike. In its heyday, the town produced 10 percent of all oysters consumed in the US. On a sweltering April day, Rodney Richards stands in his workshop, hammering a rod of red-

hot steel on an anvil—blow after punishing blow. The only airflow comes from an old hair dryer, which is attached via vacuum hose and duct tape to a homemade forge. The air superheats the charcoal he uses to a bright red. Richards—wiry, squirrel-like, and Busch-thirsty—hammers the metal to a point and then pivots to another contraption, this one built from an antique oyster-canning machine. He steps on a pedal and a blade clamps down, snipping off the rod's spear-like tip and ejecting it into a bucket. Richards is forging "teeth" for a set of oyster tongs, a specialized tool used to scoop the briny bivalves from the seafloor. In Florida, where mechanical harvesting is not permitted in public water, the vast majority of oysters are still harvested this way. It's backbreaking work that involves lifting up to one hundred pounds of wood, steel, and oysters hand-over-hand through ten to twenty feet of water. And it's only getting harder. Drought, ongoing litigation over state water rights, and over-harvesting associated with the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill have all but destroyed Apalachicola's oyster fisheries over the last decade. With the oysters have gone the town's economy and way of life. Richards is one of only two tong makers left in town. ➔

PHOTOS BY STEVEN GRAY



ONE OF THE LAST TWO TONG MAKERS IN APALACHICOLA

with the oystering, and life is hard for the oystermen. They work like hell just to break even, and I barely work at all. It's just me now, and I've made just a handful of tongs this year.

**TLP: Why do you continue to do it?**

**RR:** It's a way of life. We've all got a job to do. We're all part of the Bay. The oysters have to clean the water. The oystermen have to go oystering, and I've got to build tongs. Somebody's gotta do it.

**TLP: What will happen when you lay down the hammer? Will there be anyone left to do what you do?**

**RR:** I don't know. There are still a couple of people over the bridge in Eastpoint who know how to make tongs, but I don't think they have anyone to carry on their work. I taught my nephew. He builds miniature sets sometimes and sells them to the



POWERFUL JAWS COLLECT OYSTERS

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**The Local Palate (TLP): How long have you been making oyster tongs?**

**Rodney Richards (RR):** I've been making oyster tongs as long as I can remember. I learned from my daddy, and he taught himself. He was an oysterman and built himself a set of tongs because he couldn't afford to buy one. Other people liked what he made, so he went into business. I worked with my daddy from the time I was in diapers. I'd get on a milk crate and use his skill saw to cut styrofoam. My momma would yell at me: "You gonna cut your fingers off!" She'd get on to Daddy for letting me cut on the thing. He built most of the tools I use

in my shop. I even use the same hammer he used to forge the teeth. It takes twenty-eight to thirty swings to forge one tooth. I've swung that thing millions of times. There ain't no telling how many times Daddy swung it.



HAND-FORGED TEETH

**TLP: How has the business changed through the years?**

**RR:** It's not the same. In the 70s and 80s, the industry was strong. The oystermen were happy, and so were we. We had as much business as we could handle. Daddy and I had a four-man crew, and we worked night and day. The money was falling out our damn pockets. It's not like that anymore. Tong-making goes along

tourists, but I don't know if he'll keep it up once I'm gone. The younger generation just isn't interested.

**TLP: Do you think the Bay will bounce back?**

**RR:** I'm hoping it will. The state has put a lot of money into restoring the beds, and I've heard the oysters are starting to grow. But I don't know if it will ever be what it was. Even if the oysters do return, regulations are making it hard for oystermen to do business. They aren't allowed to harvest as many oysters as they were before, and they have to have them back to the docks sooner to get them on ice. It's tough to make a living with so many rules.

**TLP: Why does it matter whether oystermen are working the water?**

**RR:** If we stop oystering, this community will lose a very special way of life. As an oysterman, nobody tells you what to do. If you don't want to go to work, you don't go to work. If you want to go to work, you go to work. You stay as long as you want, work as hard as you want. It's up to you to make of your day what you get out of it. That's something worth saving.