

The Conch- LibbyDavis_ mp3

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:06] Hello! My name is Julie Kuchepatov and I'm the host of this podcast The Conch! We are coasting along on our journey with this podcast, talking about seafood and the ocean. And most importantly, we're showcasing some of the incredible people working in the seafood sector, sharing their journeys, examining the challenges they face and the triumphs they've achieved. Today, we are excited to have an amazing guest and friend joining us, Libby Davis. Libby is the founder of Lady Shuckers, a mobile raw bar and event catering company based in Portland, Maine. Welcome and thank you, Libby, for joining me today on The Conch. Let's go.

Libby Davis [00:00:40] Yeah. Julie, thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here and excited to get into some oyster talk and Lady Shucker's talk.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:00:48] I can't wait. So, tell us about Lady Shuckers and what you're up to.

Libby Davis [00:00:52] Yes. So, for those of you that don't know, Lady Shuckers, as Julie said is a mobile raw bar and event catering company, and we're based in Portland, Maine. And what sets the company apart from, you know, other raw bar caterers is that we source our product directly from a network of women-owned sea farms here in Maine. We're a women-led team of service industry professionals, oyster farmers, bloggers, photographers, researchers, outreach specialists and we're all tied to the aquaculture industry in various capacities. And basically we source the world class products from our network of women-owned sea farms in Maine. We work with about 15 different small-scale operators all up and down the coast, and we take them to market for the growers through a variety of private catering and mobile pop-up events with our food truck. So yeah, we're super grateful for the visibility we've gotten for women in the industry so far. And yeah, the clients that support Lady Shuckers, you're supporting a vertically integrated system of women in aquaculture and increasing representation and visibility for underrepresented groups on the waterfront. So that's kind of the elevator pitch.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:02:02] That's great. And that was one of my questions. Why do you buy oysters only from women?

Libby Davis [00:02:07] Yeah. I mean, so there's a lot of folks out there that we could buy from. Simply put, a lot of these folks are my friends. Not that the men aren't, but women are still a minority in this industry. The fishing and seafood industry is largely white, cis male dominated. So yeah, part of the mission is to increase representation and, and visibility for underrepresented groups on the waterfront and build community there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:02:33] So why oysters? I mean, you mentioned seafood, I think. So, you offer other products and so what are those? And then why oysters actually like what's the draw there?

Libby Davis [00:02:42] Great question. So as a catering company, we kind of have the stronghold on oysters. But yeah, we have started to offer some things like shrimp and caviar and things of that nature. But oysters in particular are super exciting to talk about, number one, because they bring people together. I mean, food has always brought people together and there's a lot of really amazing health benefits and environmental benefits that oysters have both on humans and our environment. So, it's an important thing to be able to bring people together. It's kind of a win-win if you're eating oysters because they're filter

feeders and they're good for you. So, it's just a really exciting thing to be able to congregate about and confront some of these issues. It's very exciting to open an oyster for the first time. We do Learn to Shuck classes and things like that. It's a symbol of empowerment to be able to open it and talk about these incredible little bivalves.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:03:38] Yeah, that's a great description. I had Julie Qiu on the program, I think it was in the first season or the second season, I can't even remember now, but you know, very experienced and professional oyster sommelier. We were talking about oysters, and it just occurred to me that you're really processing your seafood when you're opening your own oyster, right? It is empowering.

Libby Davis [00:04:00] Absolutely. Absolutely. And such a small percentage of the seafood that's consumed in America is eaten in the household. You know, a lot of the times, the seafood that we get, and we purchase is at a restaurant. So by being able to train people, regardless of their gender or whatever, how to open up their own oysters, you know, and maybe purchase a knife or purchase some gloves and really give that lesson, you're able to, you know, support people to go to their local fish market and then, you know, take the product home at a much reduced price than you would find the restaurant and just try to increase that number of seafood that's consumed in the consumer's household.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:04:37] Yeah, I just interviewed. It was kind of a bit of a departure in terms of the format of the podcast, but we interviewed eight people from eight organizations that I'm involved with in this thing called the Peer Learning Network. I asked each of them what was a special seafood memory, and I think at least I want to say three quarters of them said that, you know, a special memory for them had an oyster involved in it. So, I think you're onto something.

Libby Davis [00:05:02] Yeah. The great thing about oysters, too, is that, you know, they're all different. So, in Maine, we have two primary hatcheries that people can buy seed from. But really when we talk about oyster aquaculture, it's a grow out process of the seed on individual leases. And depending on where you're growing the product and the environmental ecology and conditions of that waterbody, that will dramatically influence the flavor profile of the oysters too. So, it's just really nice to be able to sample the different flavors. Maybe you have some bottom grown oysters in a river, they're going to be a little meatier, kind of earthier, or if you have floating bags in an open ocean, they're going to be a little bit more brighter with a briny finish. It's just really cool to compare and contrast and look at the places that they're grown into and get educated about that piece of it too.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:05:55] So do you farm oysters yourself or you just focus on bringing oysters to the people via your events and raw bar catering?

Libby Davis [00:06:04] Contrary to popular belief, I do not actually have any oyster farm yet myself. I always wanted to. I got into this industry working in a raw bar about five years ago, and the guy who owned the raw bar, he was a farmer, and I enjoyed the front of house stuff, but I was really, really curious about getting on the water and wanted to start a farm of my own. Now, when the pandemic happened and, you know, folks couldn't move their product into restaurants because restaurants were closed. I wanted to start a farm, but I really saw an opportunity to connect the supply and demand in a more creative and fun way for folks. And I kind of just thought, why isn't anybody doing like an oyster food truck and kind of focusing on the events piece of it and getting the products to the people? So, yeah, we wanted to focus on, you know, activating that side of the supply chain. It's a

two-market model, but I think a farm is definitely on the books for hopefully this summer to get some in the water, starting them on a friend's lease and then hopefully applying for some LPAs, which is how you go about obtaining a farm in the state of Maine through the regulatory process called a limited purpose aquaculture lease. Maine residents can apply for up to four of them, and it's about 400 square feet of water that you can lease through the Department of Marine Resources. And so, yeah, that'll probably be enough to get me started with all the bookings we have as well. But it'd be really cool to be able to supply our own oysters from our own farm for events.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:07:33] Yeah, that sounds amazing. So that is in the books then, you think this summer you're going to give it a go?

Libby Davis [00:07:39] Totally. You know, I'm incredibly grateful to the friendships and relationships I've built in this industry. Everybody's been incredibly supportive in, you know, just backing the mission and, you know, wanting to get the word out there about what we're doing. And yeah, I think I have a good friend, Amanda Moeser, Lanes Island, shout out, very beautiful oyster. Yeah, who might allow some time on her lease this year to put maybe 30,000 in and just kind of see where it goes from there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:07] That's awesome. So, you put in 30,000 baby oysters, is that right?

Libby Davis [00:08:11] 30,000 baby oysters. Yeah. And that'll probably be enough to keep anybody occupied for a long time.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:08:18] How many do you think will grow into full oysterhood? Out of 30,000.

Libby Davis [00:08:24] The mortality rate kind of varies depending on what type of culture you're using. And there's a lot of unforeseen environmental factors. I just saw a good friend of mine, Sister Island Oysters, they were getting ready to have their first market-size ready oysters this year, and a boat ran through their gear and completely destroyed the farm. And these are like, you know, young women trying to just start it, you know, trying to pioneer and get out there. So, yeah, unforeseen things can definitely happen. I think of the 30,000 you buy. I mean, I think you can hope to at least have 20,000 to market. At least that's the goal. They grow pretty fast in that first year. I'm looking to buy at 6 to 8 millimeter size.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:03] So that's tragic. That story just breaks my heart.

Libby Davis [00:09:06] I know it's really hard. Shout out Sister Island Oysters. We love you guys.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:11] Shout out Sister Island Oysters. Oh, that's sad. Okay, well, you know, I mentioned that we're coming to Maine to record a special podcast series, so maybe we'll be able to meet with them and have them tell their story. I'll follow up with you on that later.

Libby Davis [00:09:26] Great.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:09:27] You mentioned that when the pandemic hit, the idea behind your business was to really connect the oyster farmers to consumers, to kind of give them a space to share their bounty, right? Is that what I understand?

Libby Davis [00:09:40] Yes, 100%. I mean, I fell in love with the story of oysters and the people who are working out on the water. I mean, they're doing a lot of hard work and a lot of times they're just dropping bags at a restaurant, you know, and the client, the end user isn't getting to engage a lot with the real story behind their farmers. And so, I wanted to create this event company to bring the products to the people and just have access to a larger network and audience in a creative and unique way. We've been able to partner with a lot of like-minded businesses and organizations who want to have food. Ultimately, it's catering company at their event. And yeah, we've gotten the call. And the cool thing about it is that because of the underlying social mission we have for the company, whether the event, you know, subject matter relates to aquaculture specifically or maybe it's about women in entrepreneurialism or climate change or women in the outdoors or whatever it is, people want to put their money where their dollar is and, you know, they're willing to spend a little bit more to an organization that reflects their own values. So, it's exciting.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:10:52] Yeah. And in addition to that, you know, before I do these interviews, I read up on the person that I'm going to be talking to. And so I read a couple of interviews that you were in, and I read that Lady Shuckers was, quote, "Born from a desire to shuck oysters and change the industry paradigm." So, what is this industry paradigm you're trying to change?

Libby Davis [00:11:11] I think the industry paradigm, I mean, as I mentioned before, just the seafood and fishing sector as a whole historically has been a white cis male-dominated industry. And so that's kind of the paradigm that I'm speaking of. You know, I think beforehand there were a lot of barriers to folks who are not the majority to get into industries. I mean, it's just scary, you know, regardless of, you know, access that you might have to money or to boats or to the education to just, you know, learn the skill set involved with starting an oyster farm or becoming a captain. So, yeah, I've definitely seen a change, though, in the last 5 to 6 years since I've had kind of a front row seat watching the industry change, I've seen a lot more women get involved. There's still a relatively low percentage here in Maine. There's about 15% of the oyster leases in Maine are owned and operated by women. And so, yeah, we can acknowledge that that's a number that, you know, is maybe higher than some other places, but still pretty small, you know, on the larger scale.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:19] Yeah, that's really interesting. Honestly, I don't think there's a lot of good data around that right?

Libby Davis [00:12:24] Yes, yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:12:26] In other states. Why is oyster farming becoming more attractive to women, specifically harvesting, and starting their own farms?

Libby Davis [00:12:34] Yeah. I love this question so much and I can only share about it from my experience, right? And that's kind of what I want to speak to about everything I share on this podcast. And I think representation is a really big factor of it. For me, it was getting into the industry. I needed to see other people who were similar to me doing it, and then that kind of inspired me and made me say, well, geez, if she's doing it, like I can probably do it too, you know? It's empowering to see others do what you want to do. And so, yeah, I want to say that the company has been an inspiration. It's been a two-way

inspiration. It's like, you know, some of these farmers, these women that would come into the raw bar I've managed at the time, shout out Maine Oyster Company. They would come in mud covered with shorts and boots on with these bags of beautiful oysters and, you know, we just created friendships. And I kind of said, geez, I can see myself in what they're doing. And, you know, ultimately, I just wanted to be a way to support what they were doing because if you've ever been out on an oyster farm, it's truly magical out there. The sun is shining, mud is flying, and you're just pulling these like, briny shelled, you know, fluted little medallions out of the sea and she provides it. And yeah, it's a great opportunity for marketing, but the farmers are busy out there, you know, they don't have a lot of the operations to be able to do it all. And that was one thing I saw from, you know, managing this raw bar with the owner is like, okay, let's get really good at one thing. And so that was the idea behind starting the event company is, okay, purchase these oysters from these people who we know who we want to amplify their story and just share them with people, you know, throughout the state and hopefully on a national level.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:19] Yeah, I mean, it is truly a magical experience, right? And I hope to see more of that. You know, I'm close to the Oregon coast and we do see, there's a lot of oyster farming out here, too. So, it's really, really neat. And by the way, we were just in Texas recording a special series for the podcast, which will be released sometime in the future.

Libby Davis [00:14:38] Yay!

Julie Kuchepatov [00:14:38] Yeah. And there's also a lot of oyster farming happening down there to kind of help enhance and support the restoration of the wild oysters that were down there. So, it's all over the place. It's really cool.

Libby Davis [00:14:49] Yeah, 100%. It's very, very cool. And no matter who your role models are, you know, none of us got here by doing it alone. And this industry is incredibly close knit here in Maine. Everyone is working towards the same goal, which is, you know, to get these oysters into other markets so we can keep the price point high for our Maine growers.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:12] So you mentioned Amanda Moeser.

Libby Davis [00:15:13] The infamous.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:15:15] The infamous Amanda Moeser. I read that in shellfish aquaculture in Maine specifically, Amanda stated that she believes it is typically harder for women and minorities to get loans from banks to start their businesses, quote, "They won't give up money based on your reputation or your work ethic or how good you are at growing oysters." She said, "It's notoriously more difficult for minorities and women to get financed for everything because they just typically don't have the money to back it." So how have you managed on this front?

Libby Davis [00:15:46] I mean, I think women as caretakers, you know, historically, again, they were staying at home. They were taking care of the family; they were maintaining the household and things like that. So, they just weren't going out and doing these things that they're doing today back then. For me and for my story, I am eternally grateful to, number one, the Lady Shuckers think tank, which was a little consortium of friends here that I mentioned, some were, you know, photographers, bloggers, some were farmers, some were outreach specialists who kind of came together when I was first starting to put ideas

about this and weighed in about how we were going to get this off the ground. So, Maine Sea Grant is how we first got some seed funding to be able to start the company. And we applied for a \$14,000 seed capital that we got as a result of a COVID relief fund. So, they were instrumental in kind of helping us get some just operating materials to buy oysters right off the bat, to get coolers and, you know, apply for the licensing necessary to do what we're doing. And then, of course, to help us get the first trailer, the first mobile unit, ultimately didn't go exactly to plan. The unit we have today is not the one we originally intended, but it's the one that we are very excited and grateful to have.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:17:08] Well, that sounds like a story in and of itself.

Libby Davis [00:17:09] Yeah, it is.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:17:11] Well, that's great. I mean, I love the idea of a think tank. I also put a think tank together when I was developing SAGE, but I didn't call it a think tank. So, I think that's a great way to phrase it. And yeah, when you ask people for support in thought partnership, people are always, in my experience, happy to step up and let you know kind of their ideas and their thoughts and how, you know, people want you to succeed, right?

Libby Davis [00:17:34] Absolutely. I am eternally grateful to all those ladies because the company just wouldn't be what it is today without their contribution.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:17:42] Totally understand. We're going to switch gears a little bit here. So, I should mention that Libby and I know each other from before when we were part of a diversity, equity, and inclusion in aquaculture workforce community of practice, right?

Libby Davis [00:17:56] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:17:56] So a really long-winded name for just an, it is also kind of like a think tank right where we get together and it's moderated and facilitated and we think about, okay, how can we increase inclusion in the growing aquaculture industry in the U.S.? So, we do know each other, and I understand from our discussions and our time together that you spent time in the Peace Corps in Madagascar. I'm curious, I realize this also could probably be its own episode, just about your experiences there, but I'd love to hear, and I know you recently returned there, so maybe you could share, you know, what you were doing there and what did you kind of learn when you came back? Like what was your experience? Were you working on oysters? Did they have oysters there or is that sea cucumbers?

Libby Davis [00:18:40] So I served in the Peace Corps in Madagascar from 2015 to 2018. I studied biology at a kinda hippie school in Vermont and lived in Alaska for a little bit and then went right over to Madagascar. And I was an agriculture food security volunteer over there and did a whole bunch of stuff. I mean, I planted trees, I planted rice, I did a lot of small home gardens. I did some small animal husbandry projects for income generating, but it was all based around farmers and how to get their products into larger markets where they could actually make money on it, right? If you're doing anything business related in an African country, it usually has some sort of agricultural focus to it because that's a large export that they're doing in Madagascar. There's a lot of vanilla exportation that I worked with. And so, yeah, that was just an all-around incredibly formative experience. I did the two years and then I chose to extend the service for an additional

year where I shifted focus a little bit on to fuel efficient cookstoves because most people there just cook on like a three-stone fire. When I was there, it was the seventh poorest country in the world and when I just got to go back this past November, I've heard that it's slid to the third poorest in the world. There's not a lot of infrastructure there or just avenues for the rural poor to make improvements in their lives. Well, this cookstoves thing was something I found really interesting because, again, you know, they're cooking on three stone fire. They need more wood. They go to the nearest swath of forest chop, chop, chop, and then it burns open. The primary users are women who have babies tied to their back. They're cooking in an unventilated kind of a cooking hut and so it's terrible for environmental health and it's terrible for human health. So this kind of getting people on a more improved stove was, okay, if we can train people how to build a more insulated stove out of local materials, then when they combust the materials for their food, it'll be insulated enough and will burn at a higher rate so it won't off gas as bad and they won't have to use as much fuel because it'll burn hotter and it'll take less time to get their food to be cooked. So, similar with the oyster stuff in that, you know, oysters are filter feeders, they clean our oceans, they're super low in fat, high in protein, have a lot of different vitamins and minerals in them. One in particular being zinc, which is super good for the immune system. It's a similar kind of human and environmental health bang-bang there. So yeah, it was absolutely an honor of a lifetime to get to go back this past November with USAID and this other project called Cultivating New Frontiers Agriculture, who basically look for volunteers, experts in certain fields to go to different countries and provide training to farmers. Hmm. And this one was about aquaculture. So, we were looking at doing a market analysis of what they had their existingly. It was really cool to find that they were already growing seaweed there, Irish moss and deeper down, you know, we're looking at things like a SWOT analysis and what can be improved and if there's any farming techniques from America that could be used in a developing country like Madagascar and how to just create a higher yield for the work that they're already doing. How to organize a bit in a co-op structure so that they can be empowered to get the right price for their product and just kind of maximize efficiency with the time they're spending out in the field. So, they don't currently do any commercial oyster production in Madagascar. There's some shrimp farms, but it was really, really cool to get to go there and I did a training on how to build oyster bags, so we built like floating bags. We kind of had this like plastic gridded product over there, which is similar to the product we have here, actually. And then we had this kind of stretchy rope that we fashioned these bags with and use in a large water bottle to kind of create these floating bags and taught people how to do a nursery by wild harvesting spat and how to create a little spat collector because there are wild ones just growing on the rocks there.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:00] Oh.

Libby Davis [00:23:02] You know, the best part about it was how to take these things to market. So, I got to literally use an example of what I did with Lady Shuckers, which was just, okay, this is how I do it in America as my business. I literally take these products and I go to places where there's people and there's a rate that's charged for opening them. There's a rate charge for your little sauces. You know, I taught them how to make hot sauces and little mignonettes because they have vinegar and stuff like that there. And just said, I just go to places where people are and you can charge these amounts and there were some eco lodges there that, you know, foreigners go to and would enjoy things like oysters raw on the half shell. So, it was just really, all in all, a fascinating experience to just see how much I had grown at the time since I had been there too, was a real gift.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:23:49] Yeah, that sounds like it. Were there wild oysters that you tried and how were they?

Libby Davis [00:23:54] Yeah, I did try them. Yeah. So, they're called rock oysters. They're not exactly the same species as what we have here in America. Most people grow on the East Coast at least. *Crassostrea virginica*, which is the eastern variety. And so, yeah, this variety was wild. They were good. I mean, once you chipped them off the rocks, you know, get them open and they're a lot creamier because the water is a lot warmer that they're growing in and had a slightly more kind of alkaline taste like they weren't kind of that bright, brininess with a sweet finish that we find in New England and Maine oysters at least, but they were good. And there were some also very large Pacific oysters, *Ostrea gigas*, which I ate raw as well. I mean, afterwards I was like, was that such a good idea, but I lived to tell the tale.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:24:48] That sounds awesome. Do you think that anyone that you interacted with is going to take up that farming practice?

Libby Davis [00:24:56] I hope so. You know, that's the thing about development work is you go there, and you try to make the most of your time when you're there. These are massive problems that we're grappling with within these communities. And this one in particular, I was working was a fishing community and they're just like, there's just no more fish available because they've overfished and there's no regulation or anything put in place for net size or how big those fish they're gathering. So, we looked to aquaculture as a potential solution and you know we have kind of a summary form of monitoring reporting form after the, it was a three-week exchange over there, you know, of just best practices and recommendations and to summarize into a packet for the community there. And so, I really do hope that some people want to follow up with it, understand if they don't and why they don't, but I think, yeah, being able to just go there and to be a light and to share some best practices, you know, that in of itself is a really incredible experience.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:03] I've always wanted to go there and learn more. It's a real epicenter of biodiversity, right?

Libby Davis [00:26:08] Yeah.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:26:09] I mean, you mentioned vanilla and, you know, there's a lot of stuff going on there and I was really interested in the octopus fishery there because of the involvement of women, particularly in harvesting it. And it's just a really incredible story. But there's a ton of, like you mentioned, development agencies, nonprofits working there. So, I imagine it's really saturated with a lot of, you know, people.

Libby Davis [00:26:32] There's some saturation. I mean, I'd say the biggest thing that holds the people down, like in any developing country, is just the corruption from the government. You know, they don't set the people up for success. You know, they're literally living penny to penny. And, you know, I think you take the case of the Irish moss and like that's a very good product. In America, we are a large buyer of Irish moss because we extract the amino acid carrageenan from that seaweed and use it as a food emulsifying agent and thickening agent in gels and oat milks and, you know, things of that nature. So yeah, a big part I think that gets glossed over in development work is to empower the producers and to be able to establish a dynamic thereof, okay, who's the president and where are our contracts with our buyer and, you know, lobby for the fair price because it's the age old story, the people at the bottom, they just kind of get taken advantage of and

that's why, you know, things like the Global Seafood Alliance and the BAP, Best Aquaculture Practices, are so important to see that seal on different products so that, you know, you know, these products were ethically managed and cared for. And yeah, so I think there's a lot of power in empowering the producer. A lot of times they don't think that they have any say in the matter, but they're the ones that have the resources and now they have the training. And so, we just got to be able to, you know, help them lobby for the price that they deserve.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:28:02] So you mentioned that, you know, you were there serving in the Peace Corps and then for three years and you recently went back and you kind of had a chance to reflect on what you had learned and how you had grown since that experience. So, I'm wondering, how has that experience helped you in your business?

Libby Davis [00:28:20] I mean, I think like, the first three years, you know, that I spent there in terms of becoming an entrepreneur. I mean, I was working with farmers for all my training. It was like exactly what I do now, which is trying to build a to-market supply chain for farmers and how do we get these products into a wider audience, into a wider marketplace so that they can get the best possible pricing for them. So, yeah, I think that experience and working with farmers has helped me navigate a lot of the relationships with farmers, I think going and coming back has been kind of like a puzzle piece fit because I left Madagascar the first year on kind of just weird terms. So, it was very empowering to get to go back and again to just reflect in myself and see how far I've grown and then to be able to, you know, think about Lady Shuckers as a global brand. Yes, it starts with catering and a food truck. But, you know, my interest as the founder and as the CEO definitely surpassed just, you know, shucking at people's weddings, even though those are beautiful experiences to have and we're very grateful, so it's cool to be able to think about the company and the power that the mission has of storytelling on a global level.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:41] Yeah. That's awesome. That's really insightful. I am so happy that you are able to have these types of experiences and share them with the people.

Libby Davis [00:29:50] Thank you. It's definitely not always been easy, but it's been truly transformative. And yeah, I wouldn't have it any other way. No regrets.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:29:58] That's awesome. So, we're going to switch gears here a little bit. Lady Shuckers, you definitely have a mission and you're supporting women farmers through your purchasing power essentially by purchasing their oysters. And you know, SAGE is about promoting gender equality in the seafood industry. So, I was hoping you could share one or two aspects of the seafood industry and its culture that may contribute to inequality in the sector. And what are some of the things that the industry can do to lessen these inequalities?

Libby Davis [00:30:31] Yeah. I mean, I think inequality is everywhere. You know, it's not exclusive to the seafood industry, nor is it, you know, in my opinion, pervasive in the seafood industry. You know, it exists in industries in sectors that we work in. And, you know, gender is such a small facet and it's such a small piece of who we are. You know, it's a broad, beautiful spectrum I think that, you know, changes and time and people are not their sex, people are not their socioeconomic status, they're not their race, and so, yeah, as much as we can support the underdog and support those who have maybe had a harder time, you know, historically than others and put them up in a spotlight to be able to tell their story. That's how we can support intersectionality because everybody's story

matters no matter what background you came from, and it has value and other people's experiences that may be different from their own may help you uncover different aspects of yourself to be a better leader. So, it's critical that we support people that are different from us, that have different backgrounds, different experiences. And I think the seafood industry has a long way to go but I definitely see oyster farming in Maine kind of opening up. I think every once in a while, there's, you know, there's different aspects of inequality on the water, you know, oh, well, okay, you can't lift as much as a man can lift or, you know. For me, it was like I didn't know how to shuck. The boys knew how to shuck, and I didn't. And so, you know, hey, I went out and learned and became a really good shucker because that's, you know, what I wanted to do and ultimately at the end of the day, I just want to take these products, tell the story of my friends and, you know, try to get more oysters into the public hands so we can have a better, more sustainable earth as we need to transition to, you know, a more sustainable food system. And I think a lot of people are on board with that sentiment.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:35] That's such a weird flex, like you don't know how to shuck. Well. I mean, just like you said, you'll go learn to shuck. I mean, I can't imagine saying that to someone. That's so weird.

Libby Davis [00:32:46] You got to learn, though. It does take practice.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:32:48] Sure, sure. I get it.

Libby Davis [00:32:49] You know with my employees, you know, I'm like, we want it to be perfect, you know, because ultimately, when you're in a Lady Shucker's event, it's not just the business. It's Lady Shuckers' name you're representing. You know, it's Emily's Oysters, it's Lanes Island Oysters, it's Nauti Sisters Sea Farm, and Sister Island, you know. And so, it's very important that the shuckers, you know, know how to properly care take for the oyster, their jobs at the dealership, they're kept at the correct temperature. And then, you know, it is a raw product. It's a living creature inside. It is alive, we eat it though. You know, we want it to look good and pretty so we can tag the farmers and they can see, geez, where are these oysters going to? And just be proud that their product looks a certain way and is caretaked a certain way. But yes, there is a line with that to anything and it's crazy. This is the first summer I have employees and they are 100% making me a better business partner already.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:40] That's awesome. Yeah. I didn't mean to suggest at all that checking an oyster is not difficult. It is difficult just for those very reasons that you just described. I just think it's so weird to say that, you know?

Libby Davis [00:33:51] Totally.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:33:53] So your team, do you teach them how to shuck oysters or generally do people already know when they come and work for you?

Libby Davis [00:34:01] So it's kind of a mix. I have one gal right now who is trained up by my good friend Andy Rogers, who's Jolly Rogers Traveling Raw Bar in Edgecomb, and I find it super grateful that she was trained up by him because she already knows exactly what she's doing. So, she was kind of just a drop in and ready to go now. I just hired a marketing and events manager, which is very exciting. She had a cool lobster background and a really strong marketing events background, which is what I needed. So really good on the ops and the "mise en place," as she refers to it, which is like a foreign language to

me as someone that's got a billion things going through their head. She's like, Libby, we got to have the mise en place in the unit and operations so are kind of the same and organized every time. But, you know, I mean, she got started in early May and already she's shucking gigs by herself. No problem. It is a mileage world, I'll say that, and you get better with time so, yeah. You know hopefully there's an opportunity to bring on, you know, even more folks in the future. And, you know, I'd love to have the opportunity to devise a training program of kind of Lady Shuckers 101.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:35:11] So how can SAGE support you as a woman in seafood?

Libby Davis [00:35:15] Yeah. I mean, I think just continue getting the word out about what we're doing. You know, as simple as someone following along on social media and, you know, connecting with the stories that we're putting out there and, you know, the type of things that are important to us. It all helps create visibility. You know, if you're based locally, come to an event. We have the full event schedule up on our website now. And, you know, the way that we can support women in seafood is by buying seafood that's owned and operated by women, buy seafood that's produced by women, you know? So yeah, these types of talks are very important because they reach a lot of people. You know, whatever platform that you have access to do, use it and use it well and do it with love and intention. Always assume best intentions. And I'm so grateful we've been able to connect and get to know each other through the DEI community of practice and establish a friendship and learn a little bit more about what you do. And yeah, I mean, we should definitely collaborate on an event sometime in the near future. I know you're coming Maine in July.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:28] Yeah.

Libby Davis [00:36:28] Let's keep doing more of that and yeah, maybe we'll get out to Washington some day with a shuck event with Maine Oysters. That'd be fun.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:36:36] That would be amazing. So, you've given several shout outs during the course of our conversation, so I'd like to give you the opportunity to shout out anyone else you want to and who would you uplift and why?

Libby Davis [00:36:49] So many people come to mind immediately. I mean, first and foremost, it's got to be the growers because this business model would not even exist without the suppliers that we source from. Emily Selinger of Emily's Oysters out of Freeport, Maine. She's been a huge inspiration. Amanda Moeser again from Lanes Island grows the gnarliest, greenest, fluted, most amazing bottom grown shells out in the Royal River in Yarmouth. And honestly, I got to shout out Maine Oyster Company, you know, that was my alma mater. John Herrigel, the owner operator, he owns a small oyster farm up in Phippsburg, Maine and that was where I learned everything about the industry, you know, a lot about this industry. You know, I made a lot of good relationships behind that bar, having conversations about sustainable aquaculture and what we can do as a community to support the industry. And really good friends were there. The Briny Babe was there. Alicia Gaiero of Nauti Sisters Sea Farm was there. Jaclyn Robidoux of Maine Sea Grant was there. And I think, you know, now that infrastructure has been built, it's just going to keep creating a community of women in aquaculture to stand up and to rise and to be in the spotlight. It's their time now. You know, I've done the work. I've built that now. It's their time.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:03] Yeah, I love that. How can our listeners find you online?

Libby Davis [00:38:08] Check us out on Instagram, at ladyshuckers.com. Check out the website www.ladyshuckers.com. Buy some merch if you want to just getting a restock of some tanks we ship all over the country. Yeah. Check us out on Facebook Lady Shuckers, we're always posting what we're up to next on those platforms. That's the best way to find out what's happening.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:30] And you're all over the social medias then.

Libby Davis [00:38:33] We're on the social medias! Yes!

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:36] All right. Well, Libby, I want to thank you so much for joining me today on The Conch and I can't tell you how excited I am to see you this summer and see you in action.

Libby Davis [00:38:46] Yes. Thank you so very much for having me, Julie. And yeah, I look forward to our next conversation.

Julie Kuchepatov [00:38:52] Thank you for tuning into The Conch podcast. It would be amazing if you could take just two seconds to leave a review and share this podcast with your ocean loving friends. Thank you!

Crystal Sanders-Alvarado [00:39:05] The Conch podcast is a program of Seafood and Gender Equality or SAGE. Audio production, engineering, editing, mixing, and sound design by Crystal Sanders-Alvarado for Seaworthy. The theme song "Dilation" is written and performed by Satan's Pilgrims. Funding for The Conch podcast is generously provided by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Builders Initiative.