



Marcos, Boris, and Elina Guerrero
Grand Isle Sea Farm - Grand Isle, Louisiana

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Location: The Guerrero Residence - Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Interviewer: Rien Fertel
Transcription: Diana Dombrowski
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Project: Sustainable South Louisiana

[00:00:02.29]

Rien Fertel: All right. This is Rien Fertel with the Southern Foodways Alliance. It is Wednesday, February 12, 2020, just after five in the afternoon. And I am in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with the Guerrero family. And I'll have them introduce themselves. Why don't you go first?

[00:00:21.04]

Marcos Guerrero: Thanks. My name is Marcos Guerrero. I was born in 1956, October 22.

[00:00:31.01]

Rien Fertel: Okay, thank you.

[00:00:32.20]

Elina Guerrero: My name is Elina Guerrero. My birthday is 1992, February 18.

[00:00:39.05]

Boris Guerrero: My name is Boris Guerrero, and February 18, 1988.

[00:00:44.08]

Rien Fertel: Okay. So, before we talk about oysters—because y'all are an oyster family—I want to talk about some background. So, where does the Guerrero family come from? You can answer that or your father can.

[00:00:59.04]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, I'll let him take that.

[00:00:59.14]

Marcos Guerrero: We were from South America, from Ecuador. We were always related on the food-producing area. We were farmers over there, too, and we were always looking for something that give food to the people, but without harming the environment. That was our main thing, always. So, we came, later on, to the United States, and we were looking for some land to do also farming, but it was kind of hard to find, actually very hard to find good soil, not contaminated soil, at least not wetlands in this case. So, we're looking for so many years. So, in a moment, we saw an advertisement in the *Advocate* that there was some kind of hatchery being renewed in Grand Isle. They were having the law just passed for creating the first aquaculture park. So, we were kind of interested in that, went to Grand Isle, talked to the people there, and after that applied. We were granted, and that's where everybody—all the family—was involved, and here we are.

[00:02:25.28]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. I want to ask a few more questions about Ecuador. Where, exactly, were you born in Ecuador? What was the name of the town, and was it coastal or inland?

[00:02:33.08]

Marcos Guerrero: Coastal, yeah. It was a coastal town. The name is Guayaquil, actually the biggest city in Ecuador, it's not the capital, but the biggest city in Ecuador is a port. South, very nice Gulf area as well. Ecuador is well-known for the shrimp, I think it's one of the first exporters of shrimp and also bananas, cocoa beans, coffee beans, and all this stuff.

[00:02:59.20]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. And was your family always Ecuadorian?

[00:03:05.24]

Marcos Guerrero: Well, on my mother's side, we're Italian. So, that's why we were living in Italy, actually, before coming to the States.

[00:03:11.14]

Rien Fertel: Oh, tell me about that.

[00:03:14.13]

Marcos Guerrero: Okay. We move—Ecuador was going through political unrest and all this stuff, so we, for that time, we had also Italian citizenship, so we say, well, I got my kids and we're kind of smothered. Why should I stay there and give them this future that is kind of uncertain? I asked my wife, “Are you okay with moving?” And I asked my family, too. “Are you okay to move?” Everybody say they okay.

[00:03:47.18]

Rien Fertel: So, where did you move in Italy?

[00:03:48.16]

Marcos Guerrero: Trento. It's up north, it's Alto Adige province, up north next to Switzerland and Austria and Germany.

[00:04:00.03]

Rien Fertel: And what did you do there, and how long were you there?

[00:04:03.23]

Marcos Guerrero: We were there about three years. What happened is, during this time, we moved to there to live there and stay there. But during this time, before leaving Ecuador, my wife applied for those—how do you call those?

[00:04:20.06]

Boris Guerrero: Lottery, like green card lotteries.

[00:04:22.10]

Marcos Guerrero: Lottery visa?

[00:04:24.06]

Rien Fertel: For the United States.

[00:04:24.07]

Marcos Guerrero: For the United States, just because it's—I don't know how many millions of people around the world apply for it, but we were chosen. So, after three years, we got a letter saying, “Hey, you were granted, the whole family granted, with immigration visa.”

[00:04:41.29]

Rien Fertel: Wow.

[00:04:43.23]

Marcos Guerrero: It was a huge thing, because once we were there, no one wants to move from Europe. Everyone really wants to stay there.

[00:04:51.23]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, and we were used to that lifestyle. In Europe, it's a lot different.

[00:04:56.10]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. How old were you in Italy?

[00:04:58.07]

Boris Guerrero: I got there when I was eleven, and left when I was fourteen.

[00:05:04.01]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And did you choose, or why did you choose Baton Rouge and Louisiana?

[00:05:09.11]

Marcos Guerrero: Remember I told you before that we were as a tourist, passing here through this area? And I loved the area, the Lafayette area, and also the most important thing was the people. Once you see these Louisiana people here being so warm, so friendly, I said, “This is the state where I want my kids to grow.” Also, I was related in South America with the sugarcane industry, and I like Florida to go and visit, but not to live. And this is the other part. Sugarcane is in Florida and Louisiana mainly. So, I said, “Well, if I like so much Louisiana, I like the rain, I like the green, here is sugarcane, it's a nice city, let's move to Louisiana.”

[00:05:51.03]

Rien Fertel: So what year was that did you settle here?

[00:05:53.24]

Marcos Guerrero: Around 2000, 2001. About twenty years we've been here in Baton Rouge.

[00:05:59.19]

Rien Fertel: Okay. I just want to ask a couple more questions about your family. What was your mother's family name? What was her name?

[00:06:07.08]

Marcos Guerrero: Her name is, the last name, the family name, is Mortola. We are from the Genoa area.

[00:06:13.27]

Rien Fertel: And where was—we talked about your mother's side of the family, where was your father's side of the family?

[00:06:20.23]

Marcos Guerrero: He was Ecuadorian.

[00:06:20.23]

Rien Fertel: And how did they meet?

[00:06:23.15]

Marcos Guerrero: My mother's family moved from Italy to South America maybe at the beginning of the 1900s, maybe before. So, they met over there, they married, and then—.

[00:06:40.01]

Rien Fertel: And they stayed. Okay. And you talked about the sugarcane industry. What other sort of farming, what crops did you do in Ecuador?

[00:06:47.20]

Marcos Guerrero: We did organic sugarcane.

[00:06:50.29]

Rien Fertel: Really.

[00:06:52.11]

Marcos Guerrero: We did cocoa bean, sugarcane, coffee, organic as well. We also did cows.

[00:07:02.19]

Boris Guerrero: And bananas.

[00:07:02.19]

Marcos Guerrero: Huh?

[00:07:02.19]

Boris Guerrero: Bananas.

[00:07:03.27]

Marcos Guerrero: Oh, and bananas, as well. Bananas was the only thing we didn't do as organic. You have to do a lot of—comply with, it's a lot of requirements so you can export it to here, and it has to be certain type. Now, for that time, it wasn't too receptive to people to the organic thing, because it looks different. If you put a banana without the treatment that it should be, here you have a very nice one, and here you have a one that tastes good, but it doesn't look so nice.

[00:07:33.08]

Rien Fertel: Right. Is there a lot of organic farming or was there twenty, twenty-five years ago, in Ecuador?

[00:07:39.25]

Marcos Guerrero: No, sir. I think we were kind of pioneers doing the thing there.

[00:07:42.02]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. How did you, how and why? What did it take to be a pioneer in Ecuador of organic farming?

[00:07:50.07]

Marcos Guerrero: I think it's the reasoning that you have to preserve what you have right now for the next generations. Maybe that's the main thing. The second thing is, if you're eating too much of chemicals and all this stuff, that those residues are gonna be still in the fruits. And you're gonna eat that thing, too. At some point, that's gonna harm you. That's why I think it was very important, so it's to preserve your health and also to preserve the environment for the people in the future, the next generation in the future.

[00:08:25.23]

Rien Fertel: Okay. I want to ask your son some questions. So, you moved here at an age where you definitely had memories, it sounds like, of living in two countries before.

[00:08:32.17]

Boris Guerrero: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah.

[00:08:35.28]

Rien Fertel: What were your first impressions moving to Louisiana? So, you were a teenager right? A young teenager?

[00:08:42.13]

Boris Guerrero: Well, nobody wanted to move. Like, after we went to Italy, it's like my brother and sister—we all made our friends; we liked it. It was also different living between Ecuador and Italy. So, in Ecuador, since there's a lot of uncertainties and you can't really walk on the street like you would here or in Europe. So, once we got to Italy, we had the freedom to do whatever we wanted. If we wanted to ride our bike to school, we could do that. If we wanted to catch a bus, go around the city, we could also do that. Walk downtown or the city center; can do that, as well. So, that was a pretty big change for us. You know, make friends, stay out late. It was a lot more open and freely for us as kids, so we liked it a lot. Then, when we came here, it was—we kinda knew it because we came, like when Dad said, we used to come visit here. They used to take us and we went to Disney World and did all this stuff you would come here and do. So, we knew. We knew. We had family here, as well. We knew how it was. We actually used to join school for a little bit when we actually just came to visit, so we knew how the school system worked and everything. It wasn't that bad of a transition; we knew—English was pretty good on our side, so we didn't have that language barrier, either. We came here knowing English.

[00:10:08.28]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. You learned English in Ecuador.

[00:10:10.02]

Boris Guerrero: Yes. So, we were in a bilingual school, actually. So, we had all our classes in English and all classes in Spanish. Then plus, coming to visit here, we used to stay, like, three months here. All our school vacation that we had in Ecuador, we'd kinda come here and stayed here all the time. So, we were used to the English language.

[00:10:30.14]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:10:32.06]

Boris Guerrero: And, I mean, the American culture. It was not a culture shock or anything. It was a really easy transition. But the only thing that was hard was just leaving your friends you just made again, and just a different lifestyle. It's more closed. People live next to each other, you used to walk to your friend three buildings down, so it's a different—I'm sure she kinda also feels like that, because she's from Europe, so— [Laughter]

[00:11:01.02]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah. I feel like you already done your culture shock in Italy, like when you were there.

[00:11:07.01]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, yeah, that was kinda the culture shock, yeah.

[00:11:07.12]

Rien Fertel: In Italy.

[00:11:06.25]

Elina Guerrero: So, you were kinda prepared.

[00:11:08.28]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, because that was completely different from what I knew, even from here, it was completely different.

[00:11:15.00]

Rien Fertel: Right. Well, why don't you tell us a bit about your background? Where you're from?

[00:11:18.04]

Boris Guerrero: She's completely different. [Laughter]

[00:11:19.07]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, well, let's talk about that.

[00:11:22.03]

Elina Guerrero: So, I don't know about completely different, but I'm from Europe. I'm from a small country called Latvia. It's up in the northern part of Europe, geographically. Economically, it's still kinda like on the eastern side of Europe. We are right up near Finland, bordering Russia, it's like on the edge of European Union. Well, my background is just like these people; nothing to do with oysters. We had to learn everything about oyster and seafood once we started this business. I studied languages and translation, which in Europe is kinda necessary because you have about twenty-four official languages? So, you need interpreters. You need translators, because of all the correspondence going on between countries, all the business transactions and everything. All of that needs to be translated. So, I thought, "It's a good profession. I love it." And I still do it, but I'm here, moving here in the South, there's not that much necessity for it. So, I'm really happy that we have this oyster business that I could get busy with.

[00:12:34.04]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah. What was the name of the town or city you were from in Latvia?

[00:12:38.23]

Elina Guerrero: I was born in Ventspils, Latvia. I basically lived my whole life there.

[00:12:44.00]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And what did your family do?

[00:12:47.20]

Elina Guerrero: My family was a regular family. Nothing to do with farms, just a regular nine-to-five jobs. Yeah. My mom works in the port. It's the biggest port in the city, so she has, obviously, a job there, just like a lot of other people in that city. My dad also works in the port.

[00:13:06.14]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. You studied languages, linguistics, in college there?

[00:13:12.19]

Elina Guerrero: Yes. Yes, that was a bachelor, actually.

[00:13:15.01]

Rien Fertel: Okay. Did you go to college in Latvia?

[00:13:17.11]

Elina Guerrero: I did go to college in Latvia, and graduated there. Then, I moved here.

[00:13:19.25]

Rien Fertel: And one more question about, before talking about moving here, how many languages do you speak? I have to ask.

[00:13:26.17]

Elina Guerrero: For a linguist, I only speak three. [Laughter]

[00:13:31.03]

Rien Fertel: Uh-huh. But I'm guessing you could translate or read more?

[00:13:34.18]

Elina Guerrero: Well, I'm kind of picking up Spanish, but very slowly. Because I hear Spanish speaking all day, every day, so naturally I pick up some words and something. If I wanted to, I would just have to sit down and study. Then I would probably learn it a lot faster.

[00:13:54.01]

Rien Fertel: Hmm. Latvia's on the Baltic, right?

[00:13:55.28]

Elina Guerrero: Um-hmm. Baltic countries, it's one of the Baltic countries.

[00:13:59.03]

Rien Fertel: Are there oysters in the Baltic Sea?

[00:13:59.18]

Elina Guerrero: So, with the Baltic Sea, it's one of the most polluted seas in the world.

[00:14:05.27]

Rien Fertel: Ahh.

[00:14:07.19]

Boris Guerrero: It's also very fresh.

[00:14:09.25]

Elina Guerrero: It is very fresh.

[00:14:10.22]

Rien Fertel: Oh, there's no salt in it, or very little salt?

[00:14:11.25]

Boris Guerrero: Very little salt.

[00:14:12.07]

Elina Guerrero: Very little, yeah. We might grow some mussels somewhere, but oysters, no.

They have oysters in the Netherlands area there, that's already some different sea. Yeah. But even the fishing industry is even kinda suffering in the Baltic Sea.

[00:14:32.18]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Is there an oyster culture in Ecuador? We talked about shrimp. Are there oysters?

[00:14:38.07]

Marcos Guerrero: Yes, sir. There's an oyster culture, and it's not—they're just beginning to do the same thing in cages. There really is not cage to just hang some kind of rings, where they put the oysters, but kind of a similar, resemble what we do here.

[00:14:52.27]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:14:54.08]

Marcos Guerrero: But before, they used the natural oyster that grows on the mangrove areas. That's where they take from. It's very nice. I was thinking, right now, everybody's coastal here.

[00:15:04.14]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:15:06.11]

Elina Guerrero: That's true. I was born and raised by the sea. I would spend my days and summers on the beach.

[00:15:14.23]

Rien Fertel: Did you have a boat, or did you all have a boat, or were you on the water a lot?

Both your families?

[00:15:19.14]

Marcos Guerrero: Not really. We were born on the inland farming area, but when I was working there, I had to move a lot around aquacultures because of my job that I had also.

[00:15:36.00]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[00:15:37.12]

Marcos Guerrero: That's where we get in the passion for the aquaculture, it wasn't too bad to jump into aquaculture again. It was the first time doing what we're doing, but we were aware of what's going on around aquaculture. I also have a degree in aquaculture from South America, too.

[00:15:54.25]

Rien Fertel: Oh, okay. Excellent. So, how did y'all meet? How did you come to the U.S.?

[00:16:02.10]

Elina Guerrero: So, we met online. It was a music website where it kinda tracks all the music that you listen on your computer, and it puts it on the website, and then it shows you the musical neighbors that share similar tastes in yours. You can chat them up, you can view other music that

might be similar to your taste. Then, we just randomly found each other, because we had our favorite artists. We shared the same artists. He was listening to that band all the time, and I was listening to that all the time.

[00:16:37.10]

Rien Fertel: What was the band?

[00:16:37.10]

Elina Guerrero: It was Deftones. [Laughter]

[00:16:40.14]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, right, of course. And what's the name of the website.

[00:16:41.29]

Elina Guerrero: It was Last.fm.

[00:16:44.22]

Boris Guerrero: Last.fm, yeah.

[00:16:43.06]

Rien Fertel: Last.fm, of course.

[00:16:46.13]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah. It's still going on. But it's a little bit changed, but it still has the same.

[00:16:52.01]

Rien Fertel: So, you were living in Baton Rouge.

[00:16:52.27]

Boris Guerrero: Yep.

[00:16:54.14]

Rien Fertel: And you were living in Latvia.

[00:16:54.15]

Boris Guerrero: Um-hmm.

[00:16:56.26]

Rien Fertel: So, how did that conversation start? Like, did you start emailing or messaging?

[00:17:00.29]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, messaging on Last.fm. That's pretty much what it was. [Laughter]

[00:17:02.26]

Rien Fertel: So, you can message on Last.fm.

[00:17:03.18]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, you can send messages and things, yeah. So, we did, and like for three years at least, till we finally met each other.

[00:17:13.06]

Rien Fertel: And how did you meet? Who went where?

[00:17:16.00]

Boris Guerrero: She came here.

[00:17:16.24]

Rien Fertel: You came there.

[00:17:17.20]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:17:17.20]

Rien Fertel: Really?

[00:17:17.22]

Boris Guerrero: She came in Mardi Gras time.

[00:17:19.20]

Elina Guerrero: That's true. That was the first time I'd ever been to U.S. and Louisiana, and I got to experience the whole Mardi Gras season.

[00:17:28.05]

Rien Fertel: So I asked him what his first impressions of Louisiana, what was your first impressions? Especially during Carnival season?

[00:17:34.06]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah. I feel like my impressions are still adding. [Laughter] I still get first impressions all the time. But the first time, it was probably a bit of a cultural shock to me because I'm from a relatively small city. It has, like, forty thousand people. And coming here, it was a lot more to do, a lot more to see, a lot bigger roads, bigger cars. So, everything was really different. I love the parties that your people throw around the Mardi Gras season. I love the food, the huge batches of food, that was really—

[00:18:11.02]

Boris Guerrero: The never-ending food.

[00:18:16.07]

Elina Guerrero: That was something that I'm still surprised about.

[00:18:18.17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah. What do you think about the weather? The weather must be very different, right?

[00:18:24.03]

Elina Guerrero: The weather is different. Actually, right now what it looks like now, it looks kinda gray and humid and windy, this is what our Autumn looks like, the Fall, but it's a lot colder. But it's gray skies all the time. So, Louisiana winters actually feels very like home. But the summers are tough. Summers are—I think summers are tough on everybody.

[00:18:47.24]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:18:48.17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

[00:18:48.17]

Boris Guerrero: It's pretty tough.

[00:18:50.09]

Rien Fertel: And do you mind if I ask, what did your parents think about you moving here? When did you move here, when were you married?

[00:18:57.02]

Elina Guerrero: I moved about four years ago, just right after college.

[00:18:58.25]

Boris Guerrero: 2016.

[00:19:02.22]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah. I think my mom was supportive of me because she had met Boris a few times.

[00:19:08.28]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. You went there?

[00:19:08.28]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, I went there.

[00:19:10.21]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah, he did—

[00:19:12.10]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, we did the back and forth every—

[00:19:12.10]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah. So, he met my whole family: my uncles, my aunts, my nieces, my cousins. So, they accepted Boris, and so it made the transition easier. My family was accepting.

[00:19:23.03]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. Her family is so nice to us. Like we're nice and they're nice, it just worked out pretty good. [Laughter]

[00:19:28.28]

Marcos Guerrero: Yeah, that's right. And we met them all, too.

[00:19:35.16]

Elina Guerrero: Eulalia and Marcos, Boris's dad and mom, made the trip to Latvia.

[00:19:39.07]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. They went to visit.

[00:19:41.12]

Elina Guerrero: Just the first year we got married here, we went all back together.

[00:19:45.11]

Marcos Guerrero: Everyone.

[00:19:45.23]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. We did a little party, because we got married here, so we went back later and did a party there, and they came, too.

[00:19:50.18]

Rien Fertel: Oh, that's beautiful.

[00:19:50.18]

Elina Guerrero: Yeah, it was really nice.

[00:19:52.14]

Marcos Guerrero: It's very nice. Nice country, very nice people.

[00:19:55.06]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. So, when—remind me, when did the oyster business start? What year?

[00:20:04.12]

Marcos Guerrero: 2013. In 2012, the legislation passed a law creating the aquaculture park. Then we applied immediately. It was kind of rough at the beginning. Later on, everything falls through, and we were—it was good.

[00:20:20.13]

Rien Fertel: What made it rough at the beginning?

[00:20:24.02]

Marcos Guerrero: It's this first aquaculture park, so no one really knows who was going to apply. They were expecting a lot of people from the island, and no one from the island really applied.

[00:20:35.24]

Rien Fertel: From Grand Isle.

[00:20:35.28]

Marcos Guerrero: From Grand Isle.

[00:20:39.19]

Boris Guerrero: From Grand Isle.

[00:20:39.19]

Marcos Guerrero: So, due to us, the only one being there and he saying, "I don't want to do this." So they were waiting for people from the island to take those plots, but no one from the island want this. It's a little bit of hard work.

[00:20:55.00]

Rien Fertel: Do you think they wanted, like, established oystermen, fishermen, to take those?

[00:20:59.29]

Marcos Guerrero: Yes.

[00:21:00.14]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. I think that was the goal, yeah. Transition the older style with the new style and just kinda help them work this way.

[00:21:07.04]

Rien Fertel: But they just were not interested, or no one—

[00:21:09.09]

Boris Guerrero: No.

[00:21:09.09]

Marcos Guerrero: No.

[00:21:09.15]

Boris Guerrero: Not to this day. Everybody that's there is from somewhere else.

[00:21:14.04]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Did anyone try to warn you off of it? What made you think and know that you could get into an industry that you had not had any experience with?

[00:21:27.27]

Marcos Guerrero: Any experience? Again, it's the same thing. We like to produce food. There's no contamination through the process of doing this food, providing food, and kind of it's like I would say it's like farming on the land.

[00:21:46.22]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, we just saw it as farming.

[00:21:46.25]

Marcos Guerrero: It was kind of the same thing. It wasn't too off for us. I guess that that's what, we were interested to have a day with it. The second thing that what we thought is, we have the hatchery there, a very nice hatchery there.

[00:22:02.02]

Rien Fertel: On the island.

[00:22:02.02]

Marcos Guerrero: On the island. That should be the amazing thing. You got the seeds. You got the water. So, it's a bingo thing. It wasn't too easy. [Laughter]

[00:22:11.18]

Boris Guerrero: No, it wasn't. Still not.

[00:22:13.16]

Rien Fertel: Boris, tell me about those early months and what they looked like, maybe that first year or two.

[00:22:17.28]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. So, yeah, the first year I think they kinda—after we got started, they saw we wanted to just be out there just to work and obviously kinda do this thing and take it forward, so yeah. We got our seed. I think our seed, that year, luckily, it was a good production year for the hatchery, so we got enough seed. And we started just doing everything by hand on the little fourteen-foot Boston Whaler, little boat. [Laughter] It was tough. It was learning. We didn't know exactly what we were doing, but you know, we were—

[00:22:51.11]

Rien Fertel: And when you saw by hand, what were you doing by hand?

[00:22:53.21]

Boris Guerrero: Everything.

[00:22:53.21]

Marcos Guerrero: Everything.

[00:22:55.03]

Boris Guerrero: Everything by hand. Everything you saw. All the machines.

[00:22:59.11]

Rien Fertel: Well, tell us like what a day would look like or two-day period.

[00:23:06.15]

Boris Guerrero: Right. So, yeah, there's many different steps and processes in the life of an oyster. So, we start by putting all our anchors, so we had nothing there. It was just an empty piece of lot, water with a clean bottom, basically.

[00:23:24.15]

Rien Fertel: And that's what the state gave you.

[00:23:25.00]

Boris Guerrero: That's what the state gave me, yeah.

[00:23:26.10]

Rien Fertel: Is that lease, okay.

[00:23:28.10]

Boris Guerrero: So, to hold our cages, we needed to set up an underwater structure to hold our floating gear, so it doesn't float away. So, we started putting down anchors. That was our first thing. So, when we got out there in the water, neck-deep, and we started kinda—they're screw anchors, so you start screwing them down all the way so the little ring stays just off the very two inches on top of the ground. Not the water, so the ground. So, I think I had to screw them all the way down, these eight-foot long screw anchors. [Laughter] So, we had to go down eight feet. So, that's what we started doing first, and that was really a challenge, because we're not used to with the currents, and it was the summertime that time, just thunderstorms everywhere, every time. Just come in here, twenty minutes, and then they go, and wait another two hours, here's another one. [Laughter] So, it was pretty crazy starting that. But we did it. So, we put our anchors in. We had to put our lines and bought a hundred eighty feet of underwater lines that we connect our cages to. Then we put our cages, and then we got seed from hatchery. We put them in little bags, little mesh bags, and then they go inside our cages.

[00:24:50.20]

Rien Fertel: Can you describe what the cages look like? The size and the dimensions, but also the structure; what they're made out of.

[00:25:01.13]

Boris Guerrero: So, the cages are about four foot long by maybe three foot. They have two floating pontoons or air-filled containers that keep them floating. They're made out of mesh wire and that's the structure that holds our oysters. So, that's where the seed we put in there, and that was the first time experiencing the time of it, because we had no idea how fast or how slow they

would grow. So, we left them there. [Laughter] Then, we didn't know when we had to start separating; when do we start moving this thing? So, it was a complete, I think, it was kinda like a mess. We didn't have no schedule, no—it's the first time doing it. We didn't know what was gonna happen, how long.

[00:25:56.22]

Rien Fertel: And was the state helpful at all? Did they give you a—

[00:26:00.16]

Boris Guerrero: They did kind of give us a guideline, but the guidelines, that doesn't mean they came from that specific site, because it grows different from everywhere else. So, we kinda had some kinda guide, but we had to adapt everything. So, whatever they gave us, that wasn't it. We had to adapt it to work for us. So, we didn't learn in the first year. So, the first year, yes, we kinda followed all the guidelines that they knew and they kinda gave us that. But, yeah, it was kinda hard to determine the timing. So, the timing is really—if you miss that timing, it's gonna be just harder on yourself. [Laughter]

[00:26:41.21]

Elina Guerrero: Because what happens in those bags is, you put in too many oysters in the little bag and they grow really, really quickly. They start growing, and it's gonna become a cluster, and it's gonna be super, super heavy. If you don't have any machinery, if you don't have any winches or anything, if you're using only your muscles, it will be a really long day.

[00:27:04.11]

Rien Fertel: To pull the cages out of the water.

[00:27:04.11]

Elina Guerrero: Correct.

[00:27:05.14]

Marcos Guerrero: Yes.

[00:27:06.24]

Elina Guerrero: From the boat.

[00:27:07.17]

Boris Guerrero: We didn't have any winch or any hydraulic things to help us. So, when those cages got heavy, we used to pick them up by hand, put them on the side of the boat, and then fight those bags, because they were kind of too big to get them out from there. [Laughter] So, we had to fight those bags out and put them in the boat and so on. Then open them, and that time, we're just working off the boat. So, we open them on the boat and dump them, and then kinda start picking through and kinda separating them, diluting them, put them in more bags. That was kinda the beginning. And we had a lot of them. It didn't seem like a lot back then, but it was a pretty good amount to do by hand.

[00:27:47.25]

Marcos Guerrero: But even though, we got a nice product.

[00:27:51.07]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. Yeah, at the end.

[00:27:53.09]

Marcos Guerrero: It was really, really nice.

[00:27:54.02]

Boris Guerrero: At the end, we did get a nice product, but it was really hard to get to that on the first year.

[00:28:01.13]

Rien Fertel: What year did you first take oysters out of the waters? Was it 2013?

[00:28:05.01]

Boris Guerrero: So, we actually—no. We actually started putting our gear down in 2013, but we put our seed down in 2014, and then our first—when we first went to market was 2015.

[00:28:16.05]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And where, it was easy to find places to buy the oysters?

[00:28:21.12]

Boris Guerrero: To sell the oysters.

[00:28:21.22]

Rien Fertel: To sell the oysters, yeah.

[00:28:25.29]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, that was also the first year, and we didn't know. So, it was almost like starting—it was starting a new thing, because we had to start marketing, so we didn't do that before then. So, yeah, that was kinda hard. But we did have, at that time, we had a Louisiana Sea Grant. They kinda help us through to set up on the farmers market in New Orleans, so that's when we kinda first got our product out there. They actually invited—they had a list of chefs, and they invited chefs to come down to farmers market to try this new aquaculture, farm-raised oysters.

[00:29:08.21]

Rien Fertel: Okay.

[00:29:10.08]

Boris Guerrero: From then on, it kinda took off, and then we learned and we started marketing. We started kinda going to restaurants and speaking to chefs about it. And it kinda moved on from there.

[00:29:22.19]

Marcos Guerrero: It was a little bit hard for that time, because Louisiana culture wasn't really aware that we could have these same type of oysters if you do the right thing as the East Coast or North Canada, all this stuff.

[00:29:39.00]

Rien Fertel: As growing them in cages.

[00:29:39.00]

Marcos Guerrero: As growing them in cages. So, they say, “Well, this is Louisiana oyster. How come should I pay more for some? They're good, they're nice, they're perfect, but I don't know if this is the same water.” So, until they find difference in flavor, texture, and all this stuff, that's the time I would say, “I'm okay with that.” That took some few years, and kind of changing, slowly, the mentality of the consumer here.

[00:30:04.03]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. So, for those people living on the Gulf Coast or those people who are used to Gulf Coast oysters farmed the traditional way, what was the state's thinking, and what's the general thinking behind growing them in cages? How do they end up different and the same? Like, why grow oyster in cages off Grand Isle?

[00:30:27.04]

Boris Guerrero: So, from the state point of view, or my—?

[00:30:29.25]

Rien Fertel: From the state point of view and your point of view, yeah.

[00:30:33.03]

Boris Guerrero: Okay. Well, start from our point of view, was my dad was saying, we want to create food without harming anything. So, we don't want to harm the environment; it's already polluted and all this kind of stuff. So, we wanted to find something that is just least harmful, and the oysters are one of the perfect animals to do so.

[00:30:52.05]

Marcos Guerrero: And we don't deplete the environment. We put seed, we don't take from it.

[00:30:56.02]

Rien Fertel: Well, tell me—we all know, but maybe some people don't know—how traditional oyster farming has been done in Louisiana for centuries or over a century, how it does deplete the environment. I mean, we're only learning this, I think, now, maybe too late for some of the sea floor. But what is the traditional oyster industry, destructive to the Gulf or to—?

[00:31:23.11]

Boris Guerrero: I don't think it's too destructive, depending on how you see it, because some—so, depending of how the oysterman does it, but they also have their own beds. They treat them,

they put some concrete or limestone or even oyster shells, and then they grab some wild oysters, usually from either public grounds or some wildlife or fishery labs, and bring them to their spot. Then, they wait three, four years so they kinda populate themselves and keep growing and attaching to their floor. So, in a way, I think it is a little bit controlled and not completely destructive, I would say. But I think the best way is how we're doing it, which is completely sustainable. We're letting the wild be, and when we get in our sea from a hatchery—which they can produce a big amount of oysters, you would say, from just two parents or maybe five parents at the most. They can get a big amount from that, and then we can put them in their cages and take care of them, which also reduces mortality of oysters, because they're not on the ground, exposed with crabs or anything that wants to eat them or are attacking them, so they're kind of protected, and then we can get them to market without disturbing anything in the environment that's already there.

[00:32:50.03]

Rien Fertel: That makes sense. Okay. Now, how many oysters can you grow in a sack, and how many in a cage? What does that look like?

[00:32:59.04]

Boris Guerrero: So, in the gear that we use specifically, we grow about 700 oysters per cage, that we call it. It all depends on any gear. For aquaculture, for oyster aquaculture, there's many types of gear that you can use. So, it varies. But for our use, it's about 700 oysters to a cage.

[00:33:25.06]

Rien Fertel: Okay. Okay. And did you go, you said there's a bunch of different cages, because this is how oysters are farmed on the East and West Coasts.

[00:33:32.27]

Boris Guerrero: Correct, yeah.

[00:33:32.27]

Rien Fertel: And did you go look at oyster farms on the East or West?

[00:33:38.12]

Boris Guerrero: So, we did. We actually, last year, we went to Canada to see our—so, our gear comes from Canada. It was designed in Canada. It was made for Canada. So, it was a good time to go see, even after five years, we're still learning, to this day, on how to improve things.

[00:34:03.06]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:34:03.06]

Boris Guerrero: So, we went to see there, and yeah, their farms are massive. They've been doing this for what, forty years, fifty years? Something like that. With the same aquaculture method of growing them, but flooring them, as well.

[00:34:19.21]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. And so, you said it was made for Canadian waters.

[00:34:20.24]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:34:21.11]

Rien Fertel: What specifically about the cages is for the Canadian environment?

[00:34:30.16]

Boris Guerrero: Well, I think it was just designed for their calmer areas where they grow oysters. So, they're more protected. They don't have the Gulf, which is very active in hurricanes and all these things. Basically, all they gotta worry about—or most of the things they gotta worry about, is ice or freezing. So, that environment's different, definitely, from Louisiana. So, the cages were—I think they were designed more for just a little bit, their area where it's protected, and it's made to go down for when ice comes over and pulled back up once they ice retreats.

[00:35:12.29]

Rien Fertel: I see. So, off Grand Isle, how far below the surface do the cages kinda hang out?

[00:35:18.10]

Boris Guerrero: Just a foot. I mean, with the flooring, just a foot.

[00:35:20.00]

Rien Fertel: Just a foot. Okay.

[00:35:20.21]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. With the flooring, just a foot.

[00:35:24.18]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And how do the oysters, do they look different, taste different, from traditional Louisiana Gulf oysters?

[00:35:33.21]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. So, being on top—on the first foot of the water, you get more nutrients, dissolved oxygen, and it's, I think its flavor does change, being on top, because you don't have those hard—the hard elements that fall down by the soil. So, it's mostly just the life stuff that's floating. I think every—very site-specific, how the taste of the oyster is. So, we're surrounded also by marsh, and we're in a pass. We get very good amounts of flow coming out or in. So, that give us a very unique flavor of the area. So, it's just very—you can almost taste a little bit of the marsh, too, so it has some floral kind of taste. Yeah, very, very sweet, as well, mixed with a little bit of the salt.

[00:36:24.23]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I want to ask about—so, because y'all were pioneers, y'all are doing this first, and you're doing it in a place, in Louisiana, that is very isolated, Grand Isle is. It has a long history and culture of oyster farming. It's also, it's a very conservative place, not in a political sense, but in the sense, like, things don't change too much in Grand Isle, right? It's the same fishing camps, it's the same places, looks very much the same like pictures taken decades and decades ago.

[00:37:02.27]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:37:04.04]

Rien Fertel: What did some of the old-timers, for lack of a better work, what—going back to 2013 and [20]14, what did they say to y'all? And about what you were doing? Did they believe it was possible? Were they friendly, helpful? Did they think that the state was crazy putting this money into it?

[00:37:32.07]

Boris Guerrero: I don't think a lot of people believed in it, just because of the fact that Louisiana is used to the regular, wild oysters. At that time, and even before, they were abundant, almost a commodity. So, I think people just are used to the old way, and it's kinda hard to change them to something else. It's a little bit different. So, yeah, I can't say that they were friendly, but they were more neutral about it. They were probably very skeptical about this new process of growing oysters.

[00:38:10.02]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:38:11.14]

Boris Guerrero: But they also see the amount of work that it takes, and once they know more about it, they see that it's very—it's a complicated method of growing. It's not that easy of setting up your beds with oyster shells and kinda letting the wild oysters populate it. But no, this is a completely—it's farming. You have to maintain your crop all along since they're babies to market-size. It's very, very labor-intensive, I would say, that way.

[00:38:44.08]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah. Have you seen people change their minds in the past five years?

[00:38:46.24]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. I think they're more—the Gulf, together, it's coming up with different farms, and then those are hitting New Orleans more often, too, so not only ours, but other sides of the Gulf, other parts of the Gulf, too.

[00:39:03.25]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:39:05.03]

Boris Guerrero: And they're getting used to their nice, boutique, clean, good-tasting oyster. I think that's what's kind of changing their mind a little bit. It's more of a high-end product that looks just very nice, very appealing on a very, very—what you call it—photogenic, I would say, on a plate. [Laughter]

[00:39:24.26]

Rien Fertel: It is. It's a beautiful, beautiful oyster. I mean, it's more uniform, the shell. It's a boutique oyster, I think you've called them, I've heard them called.

[00:39:35.27]

Marcos Guerrero: I think, after they saw us working so hard and then, in the end, we come up with a nice product and everybody was slowly accepted by everybody, I think that's when they start changing about us and they're probably more friendly and more confidence that we'll do the right thing.

[00:39:56.10]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah. When you took me out there last Sunday, to your lease, now that you're surrounded by a bunch of people doing the same thing, right?

[00:40:06.20]

Boris Guerrero: Right, right. Right.

[00:40:06.20]

Rien Fertel: Doing caged oysters. Those businesses, those guys, are they—we met one of them. And he, just meeting him, he was an older guy, and he'd been fishing for generations, I think. Like he was, felt like certainly for decades. He was what you think of as a very old-school, coastal Louisiana fisherman. Are they all like that, or are they younger, more entrepreneurial-minded or trying out new things?

[00:40:49.01]

Boris Guerrero: Well, no. I think the aquaculture, the new generation is coming out, I think is mostly young. It's not—there's a few that are all older, but I think that the ones that are more accepted of it is the younger people that just want to get into. So, I think, yeah, the trend is going back to being younger, younger people going into this kind of business.

[00:41:12.26]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. You talked about the work, about really the hard labor that goes into it. Can you describe what your work week looks like, kind of in whatever detail you want?

[00:41:26.20]

Boris Guerrero: So, yeah.

[00:41:26.20]

Rien Fertel: But what you do on Sundays, Mondays, and the rest of the week.

[00:41:29.08]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, so, it kind of varies depending on the season, the way we are. So, right now, we are harvesting the oysters that we planted back in July, about July and June last year, in 2019. So, right now, we're mostly focusing on harvesting. This is a regular day. So, in between those, we try to fit either maintenance or maybe expanding a little bit or working with just a little, the few little oysters that we have left that are not caught up to size. So a regular day, basically, is we wake up here about four a.m., and we're leaving at five a.m. on the dot, usually.

[00:42:25.23]

Rien Fertel: Here in Baton Rouge.

[00:42:25.27]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. Here in Baton Rouge. So, we live here half of the time, so when we go there, we wake up about five, and then we're down there about eight, and then we start a whole day, prepping, either doing our boxes for packing, and then we get the boat ready in the meantime. Then we go out and then we start. If we see that something needs to be taken care of right away, so that's what we do first, and then, before coming back to land, we're maybe five, eight minutes away from the dock or even less. So, we grab the last half an hour probably dedicated to just pulling bags in our boat and taking them back inside to where we have our cooler. And then, from then on, we start the packing process, which involves our tumblers, which they clean and they sort by size. And then, my wife takes care of the actual quality control and putting them inside the boxes. So, making sure everything—every oyster looks as pretty as it can be. And then, pretty much, that's what we end up doing for the half-day that we have. Then, if we

stay more days, we either do, like I say, do more maintenance, that's usually very time-consuming.

[00:44:02.01]

Marcos Guerrero: Consuming. Diluting the oyster, putting cages, separate them so they can grow quicker and heavier.

[00:44:09.26]

Elina Guerrero: So we don't end up in those super heavy bags, have to split oysters. We put them in when there are maybe 10,000 oysters in one bag—

[00:44:19.02]

Boris Guerrero: Small.

[00:44:18.25]

Elina Guerrero: When they're super tiny, almost microscopic, but they are just in safe, little bags. And we switch them out a few times during their life cycle, just switching up to a bigger mesh bag throughout their life cycle. So, we would do that a few times. So, we constantly do that all the time, even though we're harvesting; we still have to squeeze in those times that we have to split the oysters.

[00:44:43.10]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. Sometimes, when she can take care of the packing sometimes and just get another guy and start that diluting process at the same time, so we got two different things going on. Sometimes, yeah, we try to use our time as much as we can.

[00:45:00.05]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[00:45:00.09]

Marcos Guerrero: Every time we dilute them, we pass them through a sorter, so they go in a tumbler, and that make the oyster grow a little more cuppier than flat, so that's a kind of a—you can see the difference between the bottom ones and the one that grows on the surface.

[00:45:21.20]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:45:21.23]

Boris Guerrero: And also, the flooring creates the cup, as well, because they're always moving, and they—

[00:45:26.22]

Marcos Guerrero: They move out of the way.

[00:45:27.02]

Boris Guerrero: Kinda start chipping, yeah, chipping the edges, and that creates for instead of the oyster growing flat, it will grow a little more cuppier.

[00:45:34.11]

Rien Fertel: So, it's a cup, you call it.

[00:45:35.11]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:45:36.28]

Rien Fertel: And it has a nice scalloped shell, too, right?

[00:45:36.28]

Boris Guerrero: Um-hmm. Yeah.

[00:45:37.23]

Rien Fertel: Some of those oysters I noticed.

[00:45:39.02]

Boris Guerrero: Um-hmm.

[00:45:39.18]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, okay. Yeah, and so then how, you have the oysters packed and refrigerated, where do they go? Or how do you get them to market or wherever they go?

[00:45:49.08]

Boris Guerrero: So, yeah. So then, basically, at the end of everything, usually it's very late in the evening or early in the evening, I would say, but late in the afternoon, we drive to New Orleans. And that's where everything gets pretty much distributed. If it goes further, we stop at a truck terminal, basically. And we send them to the East Coast, and some go to Texas, and then some stay in New Orleans.

[00:46:19.05]

Rien Fertel: Huh. Who's your distributor in New Orleans?

[00:46:21.22]

Boris Guerrero: Uh, P & J Oysters.

[00:46:24.07]

Rien Fertel: Okay. And from there, they send it to restaurants?

[00:46:26.28]

Boris Guerrero: Correct. Yeah, they send it to the local restaurants in the city.

[00:46:29.07]

Rien Fertel: In the city, in New Orleans.

[00:46:30.20]

Boris Guerrero: In New Orleans, yeah. They're strictly a New Orleans distributor.

[00:46:35.13]

Marcos Guerrero: We were doing that before. We were distributing by ourself to the restaurants, but it was really hard, because it's very time-consuming. Traffic is not easy when you pull the big container, a cooler on a truck, and also, it was taking time to go back to the farm and do things there. So, we decided to change a little bit and have a distributor. It's kind of—some restaurants, they'd rather have the farmer itself to distribute the product, but it's really a hard thing, because it's an extra job.

[00:47:12.24]

Boris Guerrero: Um-hm.

[00:47:12.24]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:47:14.03]

Marcos Guerrero: It's kind of hard to do that. That's why we decided, let's move to the other way. But it really was a great help at the beginning for the market to be open and receive our oysters, Sea Grant. They did a great job.

[00:47:28.25]

Rien Fertel: But you no longer are at the farmers markets?

[00:47:30.10]

Boris Guerrero: No, no.

[00:47:31.27]

Marcos Guerrero: No.

[00:47:31.27]

Boris Guerrero: We're no longer at the farmers market, no. I think that was only—it was only a week, right?

[00:47:37.02]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:47:37.02]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, we went for a week and kind of—

[00:47:39.03]

Rien Fertel: Just to introduce you to chefs.

[00:47:39.22]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, I think we all—there's five farmers market around New Orleans, somewhere around there. So, yeah. We went through; we did all five of them. Then, man, that's it. We were on our own.

[00:47:51.06]

Elina Guerrero: That's all it took.

[00:47:51.21]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, no. [Laughter] Well, it took work, but after that, they helped us for that five days, and then we were on our own. We made our own connections and things like that; we went out there to do that.

[00:48:04.00]

Rien Fertel: And who were the first chefs, are what are the longest relationships you've had with chefs and restaurants? Like who do you have connections with, a deep relationship at this point?

[00:48:15.22]

Boris Guerrero: That's a good question. [Laughter] Because it has changed.

[00:48:21.19]

Marcos Guerrero: Yes.

[00:48:21.19]

Boris Guerrero: It kinda has changed from when we started to now.

[00:48:27.03]

Marcos Guerrero: Actually, one of the first thing—that's why I was mentioning about it when we were bringing the oyster to the restaurant, we were kind of happy, but on the other hand, we were kinda not happy, because we have to be late because we came from the farm. So, we came in the rush hours of the restaurant rush hours, and it was kinda a thing. But later on, it changed. What's the name of Commander Palace? Toby?

[00:48:54.06]

Boris Guerrero: Toby McPhail.

[00:48:56.05]

Rien Fertel: Tory.

[00:48:56.05]

Marcos Guerrero: Tory!

[00:48:56.05]

Boris Guerrero: Tory.

[00:48:58.17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, he was supportive.

[00:48:59.17]

Marcos Guerrero: He was a very nice man. Yes, very supportive.

[00:49:00.15]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, very supportive. One of the first restaurants that we ended up in, yeah. Later on, it changed, they changed the menu and things like that, so we kinda parted ways from there, but still keep in touch. [Laughter] It was still pretty nice for him to take a chance on us and be there for the amount of time that we were there.

[00:49:28.13]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Can consumers go to P & J and buy your oysters?

[00:49:30.19]

Boris Guerrero: Yes. So, I think they are doing also with preorders, so you will have to preorder with them, and then they'll tell us, and we'll bring them. So, but they always come in fresh, because every week, we harvest and deliver to them fresh.

[00:49:44.13]

Marcos Guerrero: That's a really—that's the only way we worked, is preordered. So, once we receive the order, we go and harvest, so you know the product that you're receiving has never been just storage until someone say, “Okay. I want an oyster.”

[00:49:58.16]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah.

[00:49:58.27]

Marcos Guerrero: You have to order before. And it works nice for everybody.

[00:50:02.17]

Boris Guerrero: Um-hmm.

[00:50:02.17]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And we think of oysters, especially in South Louisiana, as coming in a sack. You buy a sack of oysters. These cage-grown oysters aren't like that. How do either you or the distributor sell your oysters?

[00:50:17.20]

Boris Guerrero: So, we do the packing ourselves, we actually sell them in a 100-count wax box. That's how we—I mean, they're easier to take around. They don't—I know the oysters are clean, but they don't cause mess in your kitchen when you take it to restaurants, they don't have to worry about cleaning them or anything, which is nice. So, we pack in a box, and they just get it from there, and basically from the box to the plate. They don't have to really do anything else to them. And that's very beneficial for, I think, a restaurant, where kitchen space is always limited, and you don't want to put some oyster liquids on top of your vegetables or down there or something like that.

[00:50:56.20]

Rien Fertel: Right, right, right. So, they're sold by, like, piece, by one.

[00:50:59.24]

Boris Guerrero: By the count, yes, that's correct.

[00:51:01.04]

Rien Fertel: Okay. Have you—so you're going on, you know, well, eight years since you won the grant or won the lease, or were assigned the lease. So, coming near a decade in a few more years, where do you see the future of the business? Do other, younger oyster farmers, do they seek you out for advice? Because you're a veteran now in this business, right? A very old business, but also very young business, because it's the oyster business but also it's the cage farmed-oyster business. What do you feel like is your role in that? Both now and going forward?

[00:51:48.15]

Boris Guerrero: So, yeah. We do have a lot of people that kind of come to us for advice and kind of see what we do and how we do it. So, we do do a lot of tours during the year because of that.

[00:52:04.01]

Rien Fertel: Like people just come to look at your operation.

[00:52:06.11]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, and then come at the operation and want to see, or maybe they're interested in getting into or they don't know how to get into, but they've heard about it. We do have big presence in social media, so we do a lot of that marketing there. So, they kinda hear from stuff, hear us from there. Then they come and we show them what we do. It's a good learning experience for anybody who will come to us. But yeah, no, I see it grow. We want to also expand. We have, now, a different area where we're gonna try to put our oyster cages there.

[00:52:53.29]

Rien Fertel: Is that a second lease?

[00:52:55.20]

Boris Guerrero: It is, it is. Well, actually, it's not a lease anymore; we bought it, so it's privately-owned. It's a different area, so we're hoping we'll have a different taste, and to look different, because it'll be somewhere else.

[00:53:13.27]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. What's the area called, or how far away is it from—?

[00:53:17.12]

Boris Guerrero: It's about seven miles from Grand Isle. It's not that far, but the area there is completely protected. It's not a big flow that it has that we've seen, but obviously it's enough from oysters. So, they'll be a bit different, but we want it to be a little bit more protected just because of storms and things like that.

[00:53:37.13]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:53:38.14]

Marcos Guerrero: And also, I'm thinking this is even if we're just, by us, being there for over six years now, just how impressive we've been in and keep doing the same thing every year, that's kind of encouraged everybody else: “They're doing okay. I can do it myself.”

[00:53:55.21]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:53:56.29]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[00:53:58.19]

Marcos Guerrero: Even if they don't ask us, just the fact that we are there, working every day, that's a result that we have neighbors now. So, it's a perfect thing.

[00:54:05.27]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. That's really nice.

[00:54:07.17]

Boris Guerrero: But we do see it expanding and growing, literally more, within the next years.

[00:54:11.20]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I should ask, where did the name Southern Belle come from?

How did you come up with the name? That's the name of the oyster company.

[00:54:22.06]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:54:23.18]

Marcos Guerrero: The company is Grand Isle Sea Farms.

[00:54:25.13]

Rien Fertel: Grand Isle Sea Farms, that's right.

[00:54:27.00]

Marcos Guerrero: And that was something that I really, we were thinking all the family about it, and we want to refer it to the place, so the island can have some presence everywhere where we go. And it's a nice area, coming out of the bay, the area, and later on, Southern Belle's just the brand of the oyster itself.

[00:54:47.28]

Rien Fertel: Of that oyster.

[00:54:49.10]

Elina Guerrero: Um-hmm.

[00:54:50.18]

Rien Fertel: So, if you farm in a new place, will it be a different oyster?

[00:54:51.29]

Boris Guerrero: Correct. So, we want to give it a different name.

[00:54:55.14]

Rien Fertel: Right. And are you gonna name it after the locale, or are you gonna come up with—?

[00:55:00.22]

Boris Guerrero: Probably a different name, just like Southern Belle, yeah.

[00:55:03.14]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:55:05.06]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. I mean, the location name, it kinda works, but I think people nowadays, especially the younger generation, they want something that catches your eye. [Laughter]

[00:55:16.22]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:55:18.09]

Boris Guerrero: You want something trendy or kinda cool, cool name or something.

[00:55:21.27]

Rien Fertel: What is that geographical name of the new place?

[00:55:24.07]

Marcos Guerrero: Actually, we are on different parish. We are in Lafourche Parish now.

[00:55:30.15]

Rien Fertel: Ahh.

[00:55:31.19]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. So, Grand Isle is Jefferson Parish.

[00:55:32.25]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[00:55:34.29]

Boris Guerrero: But you basically get to the tow away bridge, and that's Lafourche Parish.

[00:55:37.17]

Rien Fertel: So, a little closer to the coast, right?

[00:55:39.10]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:55:39.06]

Marcos Guerrero: It's closer to the coast, yes.

[00:55:41.18]

Rien Fertel: Right, right, right.

[00:55:40.20]

Marcos Guerrero: And more protected, that's it.

[00:55:44.23]

Rien Fertel: Right, more protected. That's why, more protected.

[00:55:47.06]

Boris Guerrero: I think that's the end result what we want, to be more protected, because it's very, very high energy side for the current we're in right now. So, we want a little bit more peace of mind at night whenever there's a storm. [Laughter]

[00:56:03.04]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I know that you're down south, or down on the island, a couple days a week. What does the rest of your week look like? What do you do the rest of the week? Do you have other jobs?

[00:56:13.25]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. So, we do construction with my dad here. Also do construction here in the city and maintenance in different apartments and things like that.

[00:56:24.16]

Rien Fertel: Okay.

[00:56:25.10]

Boris Guerrero: And then my wife—

[00:56:25.18]

Elina Guerrero: Well, I translate on the computer when I am not on the island. I just work from home. I just work on those kind of things. Try to keep my thing that I study for alive.

[00:56:40.06]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Do you like being down on the island?

[00:56:43.09]

Elina Guerrero: Oh, I absolutely love it. I think it's a good mix between living here in the city, where I don't get that nature, what I'm so used to, where I basically grew up with the nature, being around the forests and on the beach. So living here now, the chance that we go to the island for two or three days a week, that is perfect. Being in that environment where it's so kinda

peaceful and beautiful at the same time, there's so much nature, I absolutely love it. That is the best part.

[00:57:17.04]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Yeah, it really is one of the more beautiful, special places on the whole coast and in Louisiana.

[00:57:22.06]

Boris Guerrero: Yes.

[00:57:23.06]

Rien Fertel: But I want to maybe just ask one or two more questions. I think everyone in South Louisiana knows Grand Isle and has probably visited Grand Isle. I think the rest of the country first learned about Grand Isle, if they've never heard of it before, recently because a *New York Times* article encouraged people to visit it in this year, 2020, as one of fifty places around the world they spotlighted.

[00:57:57.02]

Elina Guerrero: Wow.

[00:57:58.04]

Rien Fertel: They talked about its natural beauty; they talked about the fishing industry; they talked about birding—

[00:58:01.10]

Boris Guerrero: Yes.

[00:58:01.10]

Rien Fertel: —which is really a big activity, brings a lot of tourists to Grand Isle. But the main thread of that short piece about Grand Isle was, you should go to Grand Isle because it's not going to exist in the near future, right, or by half-century, or whatever it said, because of—

[00:58:21.08]

Marcos Guerrero: Rising water.

[00:58:22.25]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, rising water, sea change levels. What do you think about that? What do other people on the island, that work on the island, think about it? Does it change how you think about the future of the business or the future of what you do? Was it a surprise? Is it alarming? What do you think?

[00:58:44.15]

Boris Guerrero: I think Louisiana's doing what it can to protect their barrier islands and as much land as they can, so I don't think it would go away in half a century, maybe even longer than that. But I think they'll do a very good job to protect, right now. This is a very important island or piece of Louisiana that I think will stay there for a while. But as far as us growing

oysters, I think as long as we have water, we can probably grow oysters. So, being out in the sea, I think we're okay with that, even if we get a couple inches of water—rise of the water. I think we'll be okay with that.

[00:59:37.17]

Marcos Guerrero: Yeah.

[00:59:38.28]

Boris Guerrero: I don't think it will affect us. I think that the city and the state will do what it need to do to protect all those islands. Port Fourchon, they're doing a good job on creating land, making more room for themselves and expanding there, so I think if worst comes to case, it'll do the same thing around Grand Isle to keep the fishing town and recreational fishing town, as well, alive.

[01:00:09.04]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Did you want to say something?

[01:00:10.02]

Marcos Guerrero: Yes. I always was surprised why we don't find enough coastal aquaculture here in Louisiana, having so many waters around, so many marshland around. And there's nothing. We are kind of the first ones doing coastal aquaculture. I was always surprised by that,

there's something, I don't know. But I understand a few things right now, and I guess it's a slow process that we are also involved in, this process.

[01:00:36.11]

Boris Guerrero: Well, Louisiana is also very rich in natural resources. [Laughter]

[01:00:43.11]

Marcos Guerrero: Exactly. Exactly. [Laughter] That's what I say, we understand now why.

[01:00:46.03]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, yeah.

[01:00:46.03]

Marcos Guerrero: Because we got other resources, more important, yes.

[01:00:49.07]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. That's why I think we're kind of embracing these oysters, too, because we're so used to having a lot of oysters naturally. Why would you create something that's more intensive and different?

[01:01:02.26]

Marcos Guerrero: Or I was thinking other resources, like oil, that that kind of slows down everything, because everybody wants to be there.

[01:01:10.14]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, well, that, too.

[01:01:10.03]

Marcos Guerrero: Easy, maybe, or easier than just having some crop exposed to the environment for a whole year and then maybe you don't see anything.

[01:01:20.28]

Boris Guerrero: But the fisheries do so well, like shrimp and crab.

[01:01:24.17]

Marcos Guerrero: That's right. Yes, yes.

[01:01:25.01]

Boris Guerrero: You know, like in Ecuador, we have the ponds—shrimp ponds.

[01:01:28.21]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[01:01:30.08]

Boris Guerrero: Here, you kind of don't need to, you have so much natural shrimp around there.

[01:01:33.06]

Rien Fertel: Right.

[01:01:34.29]

Boris Guerrero: I think that's why it kind of lags behind on being a pioneer of—

[01:01:39.14]

Marcos Guerrero: Being aquaculture.

[01:01:40.00]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah, aquaculture. It's beautiful land. Once you get out there, it's very beautiful and full of animals and all the things you see out there, it's a very, very awesome island that we work on.

[01:01:57.14]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Two more, one short question, one longer question. Do you, as a family, do you go back to Ecuador? Have you been back recently or in the past decade plus?

[01:02:10.10]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah. I have in the past decade. My mom goes there every year, sometimes twice a year.

[01:02:18.26]

Rien Fertel: Okay. To visit. There's still family there, or friends?

[01:02:20.26]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[01:02:20.26]

Marcos Guerrero: She and her mom, and some of her brothers and sisters.

[01:02:24.18]

Rien Fertel: Okay. Is there a way to—there's four of us in the room, you three are recent immigrants to this country. We're a country of immigrants, we like to tell ourselves. But we're also at a moment where immigration is in the news all the time. And it's a very volatile topic, right? I don't know if we have to get political, or you can if you want, but what are your thoughts on this? And does it play a part in your identity as Louisianians or southerners or South Louisianians, which has a very rich immigrant culture, but maybe pushes back against that immigrant culture a bit recently, as a state, as a political culture. Do you have thoughts on that? Or how does it affect your identity or your work?

[01:03:44.17]

Boris Guerrero: I don't think I feel, myself, that I'm not from Louisiana. [Laughter] I've been here about twenty years, and I grew up here, I went to school here, I went to high school here, I went to college here. So, I feel pretty Louisianian, pretty much. I don't consider myself even from Ecuador, because I left there when I was so little, that I don't really—I can't really say I'm

from there. I think I'm more from here than anywhere else, than any of the places that I've lived. So, to me, it hasn't—I feel fine working here and doing everything. I don't see anything else. But that's my experience.

[01:04:33.16]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Would you like to—

[01:04:35.10]

Marcos Guerrero: I would say it's the people.

[01:04:35.24]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[01:04:35.24]

Rien Fertel: Yeah.

[01:04:35.25]

Marcos Guerrero: The peoples. Even there's some issues right now, the news, like you said with immigrants and all this stuff, but Louisiana people are so different, so nice, so very welcoming.

[01:04:45.15]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[01:04:46.11]

Rien Fertel: Um-hm.

[01:04:48.04]

Marcos Guerrero: I mean, it's great. That makes you feel at home. Everybody—I don't think you have the same thing.

[01:04:53.27]

Elina Guerrero: I feel like that's the same thing, like Marcos is saying. Because of my accent, I get approached a lot by people. They ask me where I'm from. And I don't feel like they are being inquisitive about it; they're being negative, or they really want to know, and they're being rude, but they are generally nice, honest people. They are interested about why. Why would I choose Louisiana? How do I like it? The next question is, what do I like the best about Louisiana? And they're always want to start a chat and have a talk. So, in my experience, all the people that I've met and talked about immigration, they have been receptive and they have been very accepting. They have not been—I have not had any bad experiences here in Louisiana. And my personal opinion is that you cannot lose if you have different cultures living in one area. You just gain. You have so much knowledge that you can gain from all of these people that live from—that have come from everywhere in the world. It's like you have to accept, you have to open up, out those borders. It's like you gain so much by accepting people from everywhere else.

[01:06:12.19]

Rien Fertel: Yeah, I think that's really beautifully said.

[01:06:14.20]

Boris Guerrero: Yeah.

[01:06:15.02]

Rien Fertel: Yeah. Is there anything else y'all want to add? I thought that was really wonderful.

[01:06:20.28]

Marcos Guerrero: Thank you very much for—

[01:06:22.23]

Elina Guerrero: Thank you.

[01:06:22.23]

Rien Fertel: Thank y'all.

[01:06:23.28]

Boris Guerrero: Thank you.

[01:06:27.05]

Rien Fertel: That was the best. Thank you so much. I'm gonna let the tape run just to get some room-tone quiet.

[01:06:31.22]

Boris Guerrero: Sure.

[End of Interview]