

Vujnovich, Peter Jr.



Oyster Farmer

Croatians from the Dalmatian coast have long played a key role in the oyster industry of southeastern Louisiana. Like their presence in the oyster industry, Croatian American culture remains strong in pockets of Plaquemines and Orleans Parishes.

Peter Vujnovich, Jr. is a third-generation oyster farmer who lives in Port Sulphur, Louisiana. Born in 1960 in New Orleans, he has had hands-on experience in fishing oysters in the Barataria Bay area since he was a boy. He learned from his father, "Captain Pete" Vujnovich, who had learned oyster farming from his father. After studying biology in college, Peter, Jr. decided to return to oyster fishing with his father and brother.

The Louisiana oyster industry has changed greatly since the senior Pete Vujnovich's youth. Oysters were collected with hand-held tongs before dredges became common during the 1930s. Seed oysters were once shoveled by hand onto reefs. Today, fishermen use water pumps to seed oysters. Some aspects of oyster fishing have changed a little, oyster fishermen still knit the netting for their dredge baskets by hand. Pete Vujnovich learned using a square knot, in a technique much like knitting on a trawl or cast net.

Peter, Jr. and his brother supply the oysters sold at Captain Pete's Oysters, the family's seafood supply business on North Rampart Street in New Orleans. It is owned and run by their parents. The Vujnovich family owns two boats and lease about 1600 acres of oyster beds, including beds their paternal grandfather once worked. They actually work about 400 acres of these beds. Peter, Jr.'s grandfather worked about 100-150 acres, but fishermen need more acreage today because they use dredges rather than tongs to harvest oysters.

Peter Vujnovich, Jr. and his five siblings grew up with a number of traditions from their parents' homeland. These included traditional Croatian foodways, participation in the United Slovenian Benevolent Society, and of course, oyster fishing.

Peter Vujnovich, Jr. has participated in the Louisiana Folklife Festival and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival demonstrating and explaining various aspects of this traditional occupation.