

Heart of the Nation Photography Darren Clark

**Cowell
5602**

Mother Nature throws Simon Turner a curve-ball every year. Demand for his Pacific Oysters peaks over the Christmas holidays – bang in the middle of the oysters’ spawning season, when their eating qualities (to most palates, at least) take a nosedive. “It’s a conundrum,” says Turner, wryly. “Nature has her own agenda and we just have to work round it.”

Working round it has traditionally meant growing a proportion of genetically sterile, “spawnless” oysters at his farm in Cowell, on the Eyre Peninsula, to cater for the Christmas rush. But lately, Turner has noticed a change in the air: a small but growing number of consumers, he says, actually relish the sensuality of a spawning Pacific Oyster, with its softer texture and unusual “milky” quality (although even he concedes, with a laugh, that you *really* don’t want to think too deeply about that).

The 38-year-old got into oysters by a strange route. He grew up on

an agricultural farm 50km inland, and one day, for a bit of fun, his dad thought he’d have a go at growing oysters in a dam fed by a salt creek. It worked. Encouraged by this early success, the family was soon operating an ocean oyster lease “as a hobby”; in 1992 they decided to throw in their lot with wheat and sheep, and go full-time into molluscs.

Turner, who now runs the business with his wife Meagan and three hired hands, sells 140,000 dozen oysters a year, mostly to the capital city markets. They spend 18 months growing in the cool, clean waters of Cowell’s Franklin Harbour. Two of Turner’s blokes are pictured hauling the baskets out for routine grading. That’s Scotty Jackson in the water; he’s wearing 7mm neoprene waders – the thickest you can buy – and he needs them because he spends hours a day in the drink, working along kilometre-long rows. It’s hard, repetitive work – and Scotty doesn’t even like oysters. “Give me a big old steak any day,” he says. **ROSS BILTON**