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Williams' red crab plant opens in New Bedford

Story and photos
by Steven Kennedy

NEW BEDFORD, MA – Maine native Jon Williams recently opened Atlantic Red Crab Company, the East Coast's first red crab processing operation, on Herman Melville Boulevard in New Bedford.

Williams secured a lease with intent to buy the former Mar-Lees scallop plant in April 2009 and purchased the plant in September. At that time, the structure was basically a large open shell with a cooler. But since then, interior walls and all brand new crab processing machinery have been installed, and the plant is up and running.

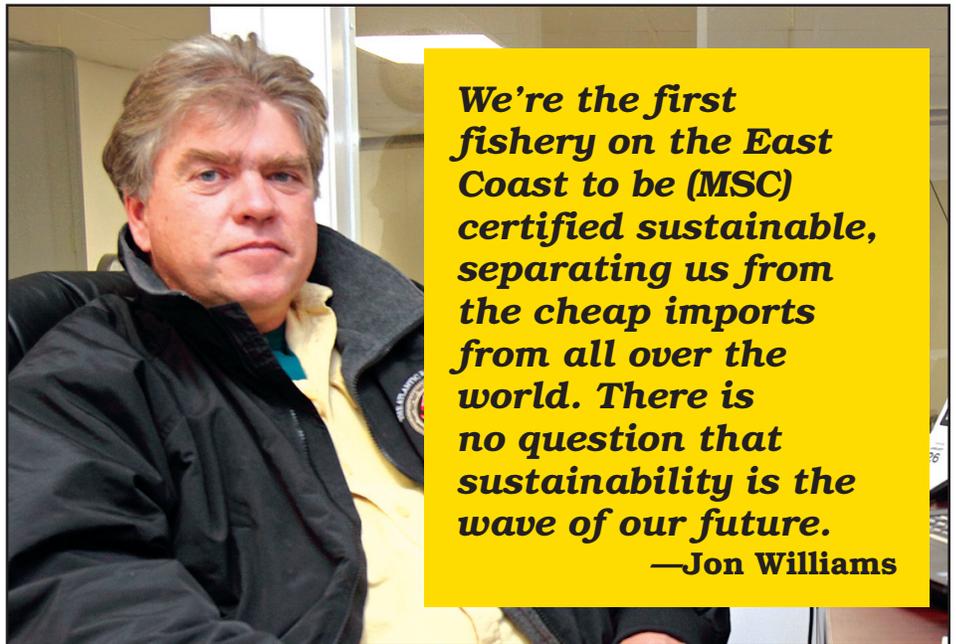
Williams spent two years looking for a suitable location. He checked out sites from Portland, ME to Newport News, VA before settling on New Bedford, the number one dollar-valued fishing port in the US.

"I chose New Bedford because it's a fish processing town and they welcome our type of business," Williams said. "It's a good place to run our boats from, and it has good logistical support as well."

While the new plant was being built, Williams processed crabs on board the processor ship Atlantic Frost, which is docked at Fall River, his former homeport.



Red crabs in the hold of the Krystle James.



We're the first fishery on the East Coast to be (MSC) certified sustainable, separating us from the cheap imports from all over the world. There is no question that sustainability is the wave of our future.

—Jon Williams

Alaska experience

Williams has a long track record in the fishing industry. Around 1995, after running research vessels on the West Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico for five years following his graduation from the Maine Maritime Academy in Castine, ME, he answered a help-wanted ad in a trade paper.

That started his fishing career. He commuted to the West Coast from his home in Maine to work on Bering Sea king crab boats, fishing for kings and opilios (snow crabs). He also spent time on factory trawlers fishing for groundfish.

In the mid-1990s, Williams found himself back on the East Coast, working on Bob Brown's Hannah Boden, often with the same guys he'd worked with in Alaska, fishing for red crab and lobsters offshore.

"I saw the potential in the red crab fishery, so I went back to

Alaska and worked on a business plan," Williams recalled. "I wanted to buy a red crab boat, so I went back to get some seed money."

Eventually Williams partnered with Angelo Ciocca of Portland, ME to buy the Hannah Boden and her red crab permit. Williams later acquired additional fishing platforms and permits. He had been sending his red crab catch to New Brunswick, Canada for processing, but was hoping to build his own plant on the East Coast.

MSC certification

But before he even began the process of acquiring the crab plant, Williams went through the trouble of having the red crab fishery certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

"We worked on this six years," he said. "We did it to get a red crab distinction. We're the first fishery on the East Coast to be certified sustainable, separating us from

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Red crab processing *Continued from previous page*

the cheap imports from all over the world. It opens doors. There is no question that sustainability is the wave of our future.”

Williams thinks as certification catches on, people in the fishing industry will have to join up or find themselves excluded from the market.

“MSC has to do with good management, minimal bycatch issues, and nonadverse ecological impact with regards to our fishing style,” he said. “It’s a very rigorous thing. And we had to pay for it.”

Processing operation

Williams’ four catcher boats put to sea on trips varying from six to 12 days. Once back at the dock, the live red crabs are quickly offloaded at the Tichon Seafood Corp. dock, which Williams rents.

The crabs are sent either to the plant’s cooler, which is capable of holding 75,000 pounds of live crabs at 38°F until they are needed for processing, or directly to the processing line.

Once on the processing line, workers quickly break the crabs in half at the underbelly area, separating the claw/leg

section from the body shell.

In the next production line workers separate the claw from the leg/shoulders. On a third production line, workers lightly score the claws in three places – a “triple score” – to make it easier to snap the shell.

These partially processed crab sections are then put into totes for transportation to the new plant for cooking.

High standards

At the second facility, the various crab sections go into what is called the “low risk area” to be held in a cooler until it’s time for cooking.

“Low-risk” and “high-risk” workers wear different jackets and work in different areas of the plant. One worker cannot go into the other area without first fully re-sanitizing and donning the correct jacket, blue for high risk, white for low.

Blue-coated workers deal directly with the finished product and wear hairnets and surgical gloves.

Cooking process

The cooking process entails putting the crab sections into a large stainless steel

container where they are cooked for 11 minutes at 212°F. The cooker holds two 328-pound containers at a time and can cook 3,000 pounds of crab per hour.

Claws are cooked separately from “clusters,” which are the shoulder/leg sections. A light goes on and an alarm sounds when the cooking is finished.

The crab sections are then removed from the cooker and placed into a large ambient water tank for 15 minutes to bring the temperature of the cooked meat down to 75°F.

Once cooled down, the crab sections are placed into a second large “chiller” tank where the meat is brought down to 32°F. This takes about 25 minutes. Each step is monitored carefully to ensure the highest quality processing.

Then the various sections go either to the fresh line for processing/packaging or to the brine tank for freezing into 40-pound cases of shoulder/leg sections.

Fresh, frozen product

The brine tank is held at 0°F. In addition to brine freezing, the plant also has a nitrogen tunnel capable of flash freezing crab products to -140°F in minutes.

Crab sections that are processed at once on the fresh line are separated, legs from

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Above, red crab processing starts at the Tichon Seafood Corp. dock plant, where workers break up the live crabs, first separating the claw/leg section from the body shell and then separating the claw from the leg/shoulders. The partially processed crab sections are transported to the Herman Melville Boulevard plant for cooking, further processing, and packaging.



The new Atlantic Red Crab Company facility is divided into “low-risk” and “high-risk” areas and workers cannot go from one area into the other without first fully re-sanitizing and donning the correct jacket, blue for high risk, white for low. Blue-coated workers deal directly with the finished product and wear hairnets and surgical gloves.

shoulder sections. Legs go to leg roller workers who extract the meat.

Plant manager Jack Reagan notes that red crab are different from their Jonah cousins in that red crab legs are soft and pliable once cooked, making it easier for workers to remove the meat.

Shoulder sections are sent to a “spinspinner” machine. There, a worker deposits the crab shoulders into the top of the machine. This machine then spins, separating the meat from the shell. The meat comes down a chute for packaging into 6-ounce plastic containers. Processed shoulder/leg sections are weighed out to a 70:30 ratio for packaging – 70% shoulder meat and 30% leg meat. The leg meat is placed on the top of the cup-shaped container.

The cups are sealed and then sent through a metal detector. Even a speck of metal inside will show up, setting off an alarm and flashing light and stopping the conveyor belt.

Fresh claws are packaged separately in two-pound retail bags. Leftover shells and scraps are sold to a compost company to be turned into fertilizer.

All of the processed/cooked red crab catch is purchased by Slade Gorton & Co. for resale and redistribution. Every pack bears the label “Atlantic Red Crab Co.”

“Slade is a big value-added company. We were attracted to that,” Williams said. “They make stuffings, dips, crab cakes, things like that. We began partnering with them in October 2009.”

Dedicated people

Successful business owners understand that people are their most valuable asset.



And Williams has surrounded himself with a group of people dedicated to the success of the company.

“Jack Reagan is a huge asset to the operation,” Williams said. “Oftentimes, he’s here five in the morning ’til ten at night.”

Williams also singled out Eric Correia, the company’s port engineer, who put in years working for Leonard Ingrande on his tuna seiners.

“Eric does a great job keeping everything running. He started in 2004. He knows what to do, and I don’t have to oversee him,” Williams said.

Bruce Medeiros is the company’s boat and plant manager.

“Bruce has the hardest job of all – putting up with my harebrained ideas, 90% of which don’t work!” Williams joked.

Williams also wanted to thank his wife, Marianne, for all her help and support of his endeavors.

“She’s my driving force, and I want



Fresh claws are packaged separately in two-pound retail bags.



Above left, Jack Reagan, who manages the red crab processing plant, is cooking crabs. The cooker holds two 328-pound containers at a time and can cook 3,000 pounds of crab per hour.

Meat is packaged into 6-ounce plastic containers. Processed shoulder/leg sections are weighed out to a 70:30 ratio for packaging – 70% shoulder meat and 30% leg meat. The leg meat is placed on the top of the container.

to thank her for being so supportive and patient over the years,” he said.

Williams is one of those lucky guys who had a chance to actually work with his wife. They dove for years from their Maine-based urchin/lobster boat, and Marianne ran the family boat while Williams was in Alaska. She did so well that the first year the Boothbay Fishermen’s Festival awarded its “Miss Sea Urchin” prize, Marianne won it.

More recently, the couple was planning a vacation to the Bahamas, where they keep a live-aboard boat, and were looking forward to diving and spearing for snapper and grouper. ■

At left, sections of the crabs are further cut apart. All of the processed/cooked red crab is purchased by Slade Gorton & Co. Every pack bears the label “Atlantic Red Crab Co.”