



At the Ekone processing facility, oysters are graded, shucked and packaged. The shuckers are paid per oyster. "The faster guys can make \$300 a day," Parkins said.

into the soft mud loosened by burrowing shrimp.

"There's a lot more labor involved, you have to string each individual oyster on the line, but you don't have as much of a problem with the mud shrimp," Parkins said. He estimated that 80 percent of what the farm grows is off-bottom.

"We have one large bed that we dredge," he said. They also purchase from other farms on Willapa Bay, which is ideal for farming oysters.

"We have the best bay," Parkins explained.

"Every tide it empties out and you get a new surge of ocean water. In some places in the Puget Sound, it can take months for the water to recycle. We have clean, cold water that helps us grow a nicer oyster here."

Octopus processing

Monday is the unofficial octopus day at Ekone Oyster Company. Shipments arrive sporadically, the unintentional bycatch from other fisheries, and staff start the process early in the week.

"We get an odd amount. Often it's one or two octopus — sometimes it's four," Parkins said standing over a frozen 37-pound block containing two giant Pacific octopus, the most recent arrival from Trident Seafood. The octopus is cleaned and cut into smaller pieces with the unwanted parts discarded. Daniel Hemmer then cooks the octopus for about an hour before it's divided into 3.5 ounce cans, brushed with organic olive oil and loaded — up to 800 at a time — into a commercial pressure retort.

"It's like a giant pressure cooker," Parkins said. "It runs steam just like you would canning jars, just bigger."

Ekone Oyster Company

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The cans are then individually labeled by hand, a task that will soon be replaced by an automatic labeler.

Growing product line

The first shipment of canned octopus are just arriving on distributor doorsteps, but quantities are limited and released sporadically, as supply dictates.

"It takes a full day to do a basket (800 cans)," Parkins said. "If we're selling more than 1000 cans a week, it will be tough to keep up."

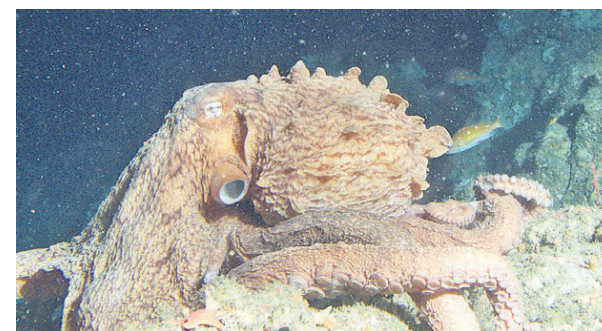
The idea of octopus being canned and sold commercially started with the Ekone employees, who couldn't seem to get enough of the cephalopod as a snack during breaks.

"Our workers are now buying more of it than anything else," Parkins said.

The canned octopus joins five varieties of smoked oysters — original, habanero, terijaki, lemon, barbecue — and three flavors of tuna — original, lemon and premium smoked — plus mussels.

Octopus are unlikely to be the last addition to the firm's product lineup.

"We'll probably do some smoked scallops at some point," Parkins said. "We're going to continue to grow."



NOAA PHOTO

This giant Pacific octopus was photographed at a depth of about 200 feet off the California coast.

Smart & delicious

Giant Pacific octopus are known to grow up to 156 pounds, though those canned in Pacific County are typically much smaller. They live in coastal waters all along the northern Pacific Rim, from California north to Alaska and across to eastern Russia, northern Japan and Korea.

Their abundance is unknown, but they aren't protected by international conservation laws. Giant Pacific octopus are protected by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife at seven sites in Puget Sound, after public outcry about the controversial sport harvest of one near Alki Point in West Seattle about five years ago.

Giant Pacific octopus have relatively long lives compared to many other octopus species — they live three or four years, compared to one or two years for most other species.

They are popular food for many other animals, including humans. They are particularly popular in Asian cultures, but have a growing fan club in the Pacific Northwest.

Although their evolutionary lines split away from those of humans, dolphins and other high-order mammals hundreds of millions of years ago, octopus independently evolved relatively advanced intelligence, even displaying signs of individual personalities. Their level of intelligence has sometimes been compared to that of domestic house cats.

"Giant Pacific octopuses are commonly kept on display at aquariums due to their size and interesting physiology, and have demonstrated the ability to recognize humans that they frequently come in contact with," according to the Wikipedia entry concerning them. "These responses include jetting water, changing body texture, and other behaviors that are consistently demonstrated to specific individuals. They have the ability to solve simple puzzles, open childproof bottles and use 'tools.' The octopus brain has folded lobes (a distinct characteristic of complexity), visual and tactile memory centers. They have about 300 million neurons. They have been known to open tank valves, disassemble expensive equipment, and generally wreak havoc in labs and aquaria. Some researchers even claim that they are capable of motor play and having personalities."

They eat crab, clams and other commercially raised shellfish in Willapa Bay, Puget Sound and other U.S. waters. Those canned by Ekone are harvested by accident by another company.