

Mussels by Opotiki, for Opotiki

Working in an Opotiki convenience store or teaching scuba diving off a Thai beach?

For Cassie Jones, 25, like most young locals, the opportunities available after finishing high school were drawing her away from her home town.

But a burgeoning local mussel industry is changing that.

"Opotiki is pretty small. Unless you can get a dairy farm job or something in the kiwi fruit industry there isn't much work locally."

"There were 400 kids at my school. Most people had to leave town to get a job. All those that went away to university stayed away. They haven't come back.

"I was working behind the counter at the Blue Moon dairy, but I got my dive instructors ticket and was planning to go away to Aussie or Bali or Thailand."

That was until Whakatohea Mussels purchased a purpose built marine farming vessel, Northern Quest, to install and service lines on an open ocean farm that's been 20 years in the making.

With a marine studies background and a long time affiliation with the Coast Guard, Cassie landed a job as deckhand and was one of three locals employed in the inaugural five-person crew.

"It's really cool to work locally. I'm the fourth generation of my family to live in Opotiki. I didn't want to leave," she said.

"My other job was not something I was excited to get out of bed for. But now when I have to get up for a 4.30am start, I think that's sweet. I'm stoked to go to work.

"They can be 14 hour days but I've got no problem with that. What else would I be doing? And when you see 20 bags of mussel seed coming off the boat at the end of the day you feel like you've accomplished something. I'm like yeah, I did that!"



Robert Edwards



Dickie Farrar



Cassie Jones

"This is going to bring a lot of opportunity for our community."

And that gets to the heart of a project which has been driven by the local Whakatohea Maori Trust Board since the first feasibility studies began nearly 20 years ago – opportunity and community.

"I was born and bred in Opotiki. It used to be a bustling town. At one time we had a dairy factory, bacon factory and a shoe factory. It's only a shadow of what it once was," said Whakatohea Chair Robert Edwards.

"It's simple for us.

"We have to come up, because we can't go any further down.

"We have been depressed for a long time, since the colonisation. A lot of our people still wear that cloak of despair. Our intention is to lift them out of despair and enable them to take control of their future, their growth.

"This is our opportunity at the moment. All our land was taken off us – we can buy our land back over time, but the ocean is out there and we have a starting point.

"There is a lot of risk attached to it but if you understand our people, we are very entrepreneurial. We have a long history of working the land and the sea. We were a wealthy tribe until confiscation occurred, but that willingness to take risk is still inherent to what we do.

"A lot of our people don't realise what we've got. It's probably the biggest marine farm in New Zealand. It's probably the first real farm out in the open ocean – we're pioneers in that aspect – and our space has the 'X' factor. We have a lot of natural spat in our area, and this is where we are beginning to grow from the use of and harvesting of mussel spat.

"Today the dream is starting to materialise, it's no longer a dream, it's becoming a reality." ▶



MUSSELS BY OPOTIKI, FOR OPOTIKI *CONT.*

▶ The dream began in 2001 with a resource consent application for a site measuring 9km by 4.3km, 8.5km off the coast, and capable of producing 20,000 tonnes of mussels annually – or one fifth of the current total industry production.

Free from major shipping traffic and fed by nutrient rich currents coming down from the Kermadecs the site is ideally suited to aquaculture but a lengthy legislative process delayed development for nearly a decade.

When the first three lines were installed in October 2010, they soon found an abundance of naturally occurring spat settling.

Spat harvests were sold to help finance the installation of more lines and at the time of print that number had reached 42.

Now further support from local investors will see that number grow to 136 lines by the end of August this year.

When it reaches 300 lines, they'll be producing enough mussels to justify the construction of a local processing plant, creating many new permanent full-time jobs.

"That's where it started, as a way forward and employment for our people," said Dickie Farrar, Whakatohea Chief Executive.

"A lot of our people have left this

district looking for work and in time we hope to have enough work for them to come home. And with that, better wealth, social, health and housing outcomes.

"We don't need a hand out – we need a hand up. By providing permanent jobs, we're breaking that co-dependent cycle.

"But we're not looking to see our people as mussel shuckers. We want to see them at all levels of the cycle – shuckers, foremen, managers, international market development, marine biology.

"This is a catalyst for many things to happen.

"This is development of this community."

At the beginning, Whakatohea partnered with Sealord and New Zealand Sea Farms (NZSF) to form Eastern Sea Farms Limited for the original application. Over time both Sealord and NZSF have exited the project and Whakatohea formed a separate company with local investors to farm the space called Whakatohea Mussels.

"We invited people from around the country to come in and invest but they thought the risk was too great – but the community came in. They could see the value. They have the same aspirations as us, to grow Opotiki and

get work for local people," Dickie said.

When Whakatohea Mussels was set up two years ago, the initial capital raising exercise of \$1.8 million was oversubscribed by double in the first week.

A further \$3million was raised in quick time again earlier this year to fund the purchase of the Northern Quest and installation of new lines.

With all funds coming from local investors, the company is 100 per cent Opotiki owned and the value of the investment is in the future for the town, according to local investor, former councillor and Whakatohea Mussels director Selby Fisher.

"This is not only about gaining returns on your money," Selby said.

"One of the first guys approached to invest jumped at the chance and said "Fantastic. No matter how good my business is, it's nothing without a town'.

"Our population has dropped from 11,000 to 9,000. It's been a gradual decline that's occurred in tandem with the loss of health services, local businesses and many of our kids.

"People can see that they need to invest in the town or things will keep going the way they're going.

"The community has responded by putting their hand in their pockets and saying 'go for it'. The confidence



"The confidence in the mussel farm is extraordinary. It's the community pulling together and doing it for themselves."

in the mussel farm is extraordinary. It's the community pulling together and doing it for themselves. We've got Iwi, businessmen, farmers, the man in the street, shopkeepers, council and regional council all standing shoulder to shoulder to make this work and that's a pretty rare thing in any community today."

The ownership of the project has extended all the way through to the final product with individual 'Open Ocean' packaging and branding ready for the imminent inaugural harvest of mature mussels.

While the mussels might still be in the water, the boxes are already proudly on display around the Opotiki District Council including on the desk of Chief Executive Aileen Lawrie.

"Our council are strong advocates for the New Zealand aquaculture industry," Aileen said.

"Apart from being a fantastic industry, if you look at our district, it's 75% conservation estate that produces no economic return. The opportunity for this district is in the sea.

"A council reflects its community, so the fact council supports the venture, reflects the support the community has for it. Our last annual community survey showed 89% of locals support the venture.

"The other reason we get behind it with ratepayer funds is we see massive benefit coming back into the community.

"We know we've got a workforce that's unemployed and underemployed and we're looking at barriers to getting them into work – school syllabus, drivers licences etc – to make sure the social dividend comes back into the town.

"About \$20 million a year comes into the district in social welfare, and we're looking to make a dint in that – along with improving a whole lot of other aspects of social deprivation."

However there's still one major hurdle. In order for a local mussel industry to flourish, they need to be able to get mussel barges working out of Opotiki – and that requires a \$52 million harbour entrance project.

Council have already gained resource consents to construct two training walls and allocated \$5.4 million – or half their annual spend. Bay of Plenty Regional Council have pledged \$20 million, and Government have provided \$3 million, with a view to a further \$26 million once final geotech design work is completed. There is strong optimism that the growing mussel industry will be a catalyst to secure the funding to complete the works.

"It's a chicken and egg situation," said Selby.

"Of the 15 years I was on council, for 13 we were working on the entrance development and they're still working on it now, but it's finally getting to the stage where in the next three years it needs to be done.

"It will also open up new opportunities.

"I can see that in 15 years' time, that tourism and marine engineering will be the biggest harbour users.

"There will be more people living and working here and things will just multiply. The opportunities will happen. It will bring more families, and teachers and nurses and carpenters and dentists and once a community starts growing like that, it takes care of itself.

"I've always tried to do my bit for the community – in school and sports groups. I always saw being a councillor as being a community service too. For me, this is an extension of that. I really believe the harbour entrance will be the salvation of the town and the mussel farm is the driver for that."

It's mussels by Opotiki, for Opotiki. ■

