

OH 526 JasonRuth

BRENT LEWIS: My name's Brent Lewis. Today is March 26th, 2024, and we're doing an oral history interview with Jason Ruth. Jason, do we have your permission to record?

JASON RUTH: [00:00:12] You certainly do.

BRENT LEWIS: Awesome, man, the first thing we're going to talk a little bit about is your own personal background. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

JASON RUTH: [00:00:20] I was born in Easton, Maryland, at Easton Memorial Hospital. Born and raised on Dundee Avenue in Chester up until I was 21 years old, and then moved to Centerville, Maryland, so...

BRENT LEWIS: What year were you born...?

JASON RUTH: [00:00:33] Born in 1971.

BRENT LEWIS: Nineteen seventy-one, and what was your family like?

JASON RUTH: [00:00:37] My family was a... My father was a waterman pretty much all his career. He decided in the mid-'70s to get out of the water business. He actually worked for Sonny Schulz and sold boats there at the Fisherman's Yacht Sales it was called, I believe, on the Kent Narrows. Sold a boat to a particular person who did not know how to run it, so he became captain of the boat

and ran it up and down the East Coast. Later working for his company, it was a big produce company in Jessup, Maryland. My mother basically has been... She is from Saint Michael's, so some sidebars to this story is that my... Her father was Wilson Jarboe who was the original owner of the property where the Maritime Museum sits today. He was the largest tomato canner in the entire country in... until the mid-'70 s, where California learned how to grow two crops a year. So my mother was the youngest daughter of him. She migrated here to be a nanny for Arthur Kudner on Talisman Farm, and that's where she met my father who lived on Perrys Corner Road in Grasonville, and hence where I came from, so... So my mother was just a housewife all her life, and she would later on have a house cleaning business and is doing very well today, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Did you have siblings?

JASON RUTH: [00:02:00] I have a younger sister, she is...

She lives in Church Hill, is... She is director of Child Protective Services for Kent County, so...

BRENT LEWIS: What were your parents' names?

JASON RUTH: [00:02:12] My father was John Wesley Ruth Jr., and my mother is Sharon Renee Jarboe Ruth.

BRENT LEWIS: When you were a kid, was your dad still working on the water at that time?

JASON RUTH: [00:02:23] He did until I was probably in fifth or sixth grade, he worked on the water. At that time, there were some major changes on... in the water business, and it was a tough life, and he wanted to better himself and just, you know, the... He had... His boat actually caught on fire and exploded and so he lost all the property he had at the time. And he decided that was his move... that was transition period to get off the water.

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm, what fisheries... what in fisheries did he work, was he an oysterman, a crabber?

JASON RUTH: [00:02:57] He was an oysterman, he... a big rock fisherman. He did crabbing as well, and clamming was a big part of what he did as well, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Mm-hmm, did you have other members of your family who were watermen?

JASON RUTH: [00:03:11] Most the majority of my family growing up. My grandfather, John Wesley Ruth had seven brothers and sisters, most of which were locally here in the water business and still are to this day.

BRENT LEWIS: Here in Queen Anne's County?

JASON RUTH: [00:03:26] Yes, sir.

BRENT LEWIS: And so they still... a lot of the family still work on the water?

JASON RUTH: [00:03:30] A lot of the family still work on the water or they have ties to it. It might not be as... You know, some are charter boat captains, some are clammers, some are oystermen. And even the generation since then have really instilled into the water business here locally.

BRENT LEWIS: So you grew up here on Kent Island?

JASON RUTH: [00:03:47] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: What was Kent Island like when you were a kid?

JASON RUTH: [00:03:51] Ah, the greatest place you could ever live as far as I'm concerned. I mean, you know, I had... you had free will to do what you wanted, you knew everyone. You couldn't be misbehaving because I think other parents had reciprocity in punishing your children, so, and individual children, so you were always on your toes. And it was just a great place to grow up, I mean, I loved it, I wish... you know, I wish everybody could experience the life that we had here on Kent Island growing up.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you spend any time working on the water when you were a kid?

JASON RUTH: [00:04:22] I did. My father was not one for me to sit home. When I was 11 years old, he bought me my first boat, fixed it up for me from a gentleman named Ozzie Callis[?]. And he bought that boat and put a little outboard on it, bought me 50 eel pots and taught me how to

trotline, and I did that. I wasn't very comfortable with myself, but I did that a few times when I was 11 or 12 and then I decided... 11, excuse me. When I was 12, I decided to get work from my uncle, Preston Ruth. I worked for him the entire summer. Little did I know that he was pretty much blind at the time, and I... he... I took care of everything running the boat just so he could have an income, I didn't make very much money. The second year and when I was 13, my father got me a job with Mr. Billy Harris, who had just retired from owning Harris Seafood. Went on the water, and I was his assistant, made fantastic money for a 12-year-old. Two hundred dollars a week, I remember it, I thought I was... six days a week. And by about the second week of the summer, oh, it was... came to pay day, and Mr. Harris, who was a multimillionaire at that time to begin with, he came up to me, and he said, "Jason, I can't afford to pay you anymore." And I was actually angered by that, and he let me go, and I thought... You know, it took me till many years later to realize that he just meant to say that I was capable to go on my own from now on, so I did that. And from when I was 13, I... the rest of that year, I worked on the water and still kept that boat for a while. And then after that, from 14 on, I

worked at Hari-- I've been at Harris Seafood ever since,
so...

BRENT LEWIS: Was there a point that you ever thought that you
would follow that path, that you would be a waterman?

JASON RUTH: [00:06:19] Not really, my dad, he, kind of,
threatened me. He said, "I never want you to do this for a
living, but I want you to know how to do it."

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

JASON RUTH: [00:06:27] So I did have a passion for it, I just
love it, I loved, so... I mean, and that's how I, kind of,
got into the seafood business was taking... you know,
skirting the guidelines of what my dad wished me not to do,
so, and it worked out well for so far.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, and that brings me to the question, you
were very young when you started working for the Harrises.
Where did that relationship come from, where...? Are they
family, were they related to you guys in any way?

JASON RUTH: [00:07:00] Not really related, you know, they
were, again, a local... I mean, they were all roughly the
same age, they, kind of, went to school together. But my
father become ill at that time, I was 14, he developed
pancreatic cancer. So he, kind of, took me down to the
Harrises and Mr. Art Oertel and wanted me to... them to,
kind of, take me under their wing. So unbeknownst to me,

that's what they were doing. They took me in as their own child. My father passed away six months later in October at the age of 46, and they took me under their wing and, kind of, raised me as their own from then on along...

BRENT LEWIS: How old were you then, Jason?

JASON RUTH: [00:07:42] I was 14.

BRENT LEWIS: Fourteen?

JASON RUTH: [00:07:43] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: So that's the age that kids are allowed to go to work...

JASON RUTH: [00:07:49] Actually, I'm sorry, I was 15, that was... yeah, I just turned 15 as... That was it, the age kids were allowed to go to work, they let me just... I was just a laborer, they let me do whatever I wanted to do there. I mean, you know, as long as it was picking things up and putting things down, I was good to go.

BRENT LEWIS: So what was your... what were your jobs, what kind of things did you do for him at that young age?

JASON RUTH: [00:08:10] We just... we, you know, worked on the docks, unloading the boats, putting stuff, orders up, stuff like that. I'll never forget because I thought I was just... You could've thought I was president of the United States. I mean, I was 14 years old, and... we were buying crabs, and at that time, everybody paid in cash. And Mr.

Jerry Harris said... I'd pay the waterman or write a ticket up for him, and he got tired of me going for him for money, so he gave me like a knot of two or 3000 dollars and said, "Here, you just pay him yourself." And I was walking around, a big old knot in my pocket when I was 14 years old, and I thought it was... you know, it doesn't get any better than that.

BRENT LEWIS: And dealing with grown men.

JASON RUTH: [00:08:45] And dealing with grown men, right, yep. And, you know, through all those year... I mean, for dealing with that, I mean, I really learned a lot. I learned, you know, a lot about the water business because I was in conversation with each and every one of them every day and what to do and what not to do, so... And it's always been a passion of mine, and I just, kind of, stuck with it ever since.

BRENT LEWIS: What were Captain Billy Harris and Sis like, what were they like as people?

JASON RUTH: [00:09:09] They were great people. Mr. Billy was a... yeah, he was just a wonderful man, always good to me and many people, he loved helping people, he loved people succeeding. Miss Sis, a fantastic person, liked to gossip a little bit, but [laughing] she was always good. I went to them many times throughout my life, they always treated

me like family, and, you know, in times of need or, you know, if just to have a conversation, they were always there for you all the time.

BRENT LEWIS: The rest of the family as well?

JASON RUTH: [00:09:42] All of them, yeah. I mean, you know, I've always been considered their third or the Harris side, the third son is what it is. And the Oertel side, I'm probably closer to Mr. Oertel than his own son is. That's how close we are, so, and always have been.

BRENT LEWIS: Primarily from proximity, from being around them all the time.

JASON RUTH: [00:10:05] And just on their coattails every day, learning from the stuff that they learned and...

BRENT LEWIS: And they must have... you must have proven yourself to them for that relationship to build and for you to, which we'll get into, but grow into the industry leader that you've, kind of, become...

JASON RUTH: [00:10:24] Well, I think with anyone, I mean, if you show desire to work and to do anything anymore, I mean, you... there's... the sky's the limit on that. I mean, and that's what it was for me. I went there, and I wanted all the... I had a hunger for money, and they wanted... All the hours I wanted to work and any job that I wanted to do. And I... you know, I wanted to seek responsibility as

well, so I would put myself in situations where... you know, where it wasn't comfortable, but it was somewhere nobody else wanted to be. And if I succeeded with it, it just, you know, catapult me to the next project. You know, it was... Losing my father when I was 14 was tough. I mean, my father was the breadwinner, again, my mom was just a housewife, and she would... Unfortunately, for my mother, when she was... when her mother was pregnant with her, her mother contracted German measles, so my mother... and part of the side effects of that is partial deafness. So my mom is about 60 to 70 percent deaf, so, and she didn't get her first hearing aids until she was a senior in high school. So, you know, she was impaired, I should say, all my life, so she relied on a strong man to really carry her through all the time. So that, you know, I had to learn finance, I had to learn responsibility and everything at an early age. And still to... like my younger sister, I had to put her through college at... You know, I was 23, putting my sister through college, and it was just, you know, some of those things that I had to grow up really quick. And I guess that showed in my work relationship with the Harrises that, kind of, moved me forward.

BRENT LEWIS: Did you continue to work on the water at all?

JASON RUTH: [00:12:06] I did not, I did not. I mean, I enjoyed it, I had... You know, I'd go crabbing for myself or I'd go fishing or whatever, but it wasn't a for-profit job for me anymore.

BRENT LEWIS: Right, because you were, kind of, joining the industry in a different capacity?

JASON RUTH: [00:12:21] Yeah, yeah, I... yeah, it was. I was... I felt very comfortable there, and I liked what I did, I liked the... You know, being in that place is totally different than any workplace because it's not the same job every day. Yeah, it's the same purpose at the end of the day, and you're going to make sure this truck gets loaded and these customers are happy. But the bottom line is the wind might blow 40 deg-- miles an hour in this direction today, and it might be sunny, it might be rainy, and you might have 10 boats working, you might have zero. And you have to plan for those kind of... you know, those variances, and it's always made the job interesting all the time.

BRENT LEWIS: And we'll certainly move into that because I want to understand more about, you know, what you guys do. You mentioned that you put your sister through college, you went to college?

JASON RUTH: [00:13:10] I did not.

BRENT LEWIS: You didn't?

JASON RUTH: [00:13:12] Did not.

BRENT LEWIS: So you've worked for the Harrises since before high school pretty much or ninth grade...

JASON RUTH: [00:13:18] Correct.

BRENT LEWIS: ...or so? Little history of Kent Narrows, can you tell us a little bit about that area?

JASON RUTH: [00:13:27] I... you know, I am not the... I will not say I'm the historian of Kent Narrows, but, I mean, if you look at what it was and what it is today, it is... it's changed dramatically. I mean, at one time, there was 26 processing plants on the Kent Narrows, a small little area there that processed oysters, crabs, clams, stuff like that. You know, today... fast-forward today, we are the last remaining one that's still there. The whole industry has changed in general, but Kent Narrows was a very... it was a diverse place. I mean, I remember as a kid, you know, you don't go on that side of the tracks, as it was so called, you know, because that's where a lot of the shanties were, and that's where a different... I'm not saying... I'm not even going to say that, but that's where trouble was at times.

BRENT LEWIS: Sure. If nothing else, the people in the shanties were often transient.

JASON RUTH: [00:14:24] Correct, they weren't locals in a sense, they'd come here for... just to work, and... you know? And it was... you know, you kind of... you respected your boundaries, and you stayed on the north side of Kent Narrows, it was a totally different people there, and... you know. And I got to know at working at Harris's, you know, we had shanties in our parking lots. And then one of my jobs every week was to go out and read the gas meters and, you know, see the people, make sure everything was all right. And it was... you know, you got to know a lot of diverse people, and it was great. And then like I said earlier, just the people on Kent Island were so different, you... And I'd ride my bike to work or up the road every day, and every car you knew, you know, you passed and you waved at them. They... you know, it was a great... again, a great place to grow up.

BRENT LEWIS: And you weren't far, if you were growing up on Dundee in the Kent Narrows, that's a quick bicycle ride...

JASON RUTH: [00:15:18] Exactly...

BRENT LEWIS: ...for...

JASON RUTH: [00:15:19] And, you know, wherever you could get with your bike is where you were allowed, so, and that's... that was the rules, but. And, you know, I would be afraid to ride a bike on that road today but... [laughing]

BRENT LEWIS: So you...so at that time when you were growing up and just starting to work down there, Harris Crab House wasn't a thing or it was just beginning?

JASON RUTH: [00:15:39] Just it was in the beginning stages. It was in the front of the original oyster house. Where Harris Crab House is now is where Kent Oyster Company was, which was another company that Mr. Harris had owned. They hadn't... They weren't that... When I was there, that plant wasn't processing at the time. They were using it to just wash oysters a little bit and put them in boxes. And that was, you know, when we were in high school, you know, I would... During oyster season, you know, I would get in... When I was... turned 16, I would race, get out of school at 2:10, I'd race to Kent Island, so I could wheel oysters all afternoon off the boats for, you know, a dollar here, two dollars there just to make some extra money. And we'd work nights in the... in Kent Oyster Company, boxing up product for them the next day. It was just, you know, just...

BRENT LEWIS: You're a hardworking, little...

JASON RUTH: [00:16:26] Oh, I loved...

BRENT LEWIS: ...dude...

JASON RUTH: [00:16:27] ...I love money, I'm sorry.

BRENT LEWIS: [chuckles] [Now is there?]?...

JASON RUTH: [00:16:31] Being in high school and having a big, jacked-up pickup truck and money in your pocket got... it went a long ways with the ladies.

BRENT LEWIS: Goes a long way. [laughing] When did the delineation...? I mean, there is a separation between Harris Seafood and Harris Crab House, right?

JASON RUTH: [00:16:47] Correct.

BRENT LEWIS: Two different businesses?

JASON RUTH: [00:16:49] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: How... when did that, kind of, happen?

JASON RUTH: [00:16:53] Well, as you know, really in 1989, when they officially opened the new Kent Narrows Bridge, it changed this area. That was the deciding factor that changed all of Kent Narrows to what it is today. I mean, you've... "Reached the beach" was the thing, and it brought so many people here. With that being said, you know, Harris Crab House went from just only open from... They, kind of, polarized the oyster season, so they would open up April fifteenth when the oyster season closed, and they would close September fifteenth when the oyster season opened. And, you know, the popularity of the restaurant got so big that we saw a need, and the oyster business had started in a demise at that time. Product was getting harder and harder to obtain in Maryland through disease,

death of the oyster. So we decided in 1990 to build a new restaurant where the old Kent Oyster Company was. We built that, opened it up in 1991. I mean that was a painstaking process, all hands on deck. I mean, I painted every board in that restaurant before it went up, just, you know, everybody was a part of the project. So we opened that in... March 9, 1991, is when we opened that, and, you know, that really changed that area tremendously, I mean far as, at least, the Harris complex anyway.

BRENT LEWIS: Where Dessert First is, was that an original building?

JASON RUTH: [00:18:17] That was a pavilion we put up a couple years later. We saw the need for doing big parties, bus parties and stuff, but we didn't want to put them in the restaurant and take away other seating. So we built this pavilion to, kind of, do these private parties in the summertime, which went really well for a long time. I don't know if I'm getting too far ahead of myself, but during COVID, you know, big parties were not something that anybody wants, so, and it, kind of, steered people away. Billy Oertel had a vision of putting a coffee shop there, which I'll be perfectly honest, ah, you couldn't have sold me that pitch any day of the week, I didn't see it coming, I mean. And to... I've apologized numerous times since

then about if I had any negative opinions about it because it's highly successful and it's beautiful and does a fantastic job, and it's really what that area needed, so...

BRENT LEWIS: It fits a certain...

JASON RUTH: [00:19:13] It does.

BRENT LEWIS: ...niche that wasn't there before.

JASON RUTH: [00:19:15] That wasn't there. That's not me, I'm a 25-cent-cup-of-coffee guy and, you know, but it... I can see the value into it today, and it's very successful, and I... Any opinion he's got or ideas he has,...

BRENT LEWIS: [chuckles] Yeah, you...

JASON RUTH: [00:19:28] ...I'm right behind. I'm his biggest supporter now, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Because also down at Kent Narrows, not only has the seafood industry changed, but the marinas have changed.

JASON RUTH: [00:19:38] Correct.

BRENT LEWIS: [00:19:38] So that people who come in and out of Kent Narrows by boat have probably changed over the years.

JASON RUTH: [00:19:45] Correct, I mean you really look at Kent Narrows, and I'm a boat owner myself, so I see the lure to it. But it is really a central hub to a lot of places. I mean you can get to Rock Hall, you can get to Baltimore, you can get to Saint Michaels, even Annapolis in in a short amount of time without, you know, really not

costing yourselves a lot of money and fuel. You have amenities all around you, it's really like... it's the go-to place for boating. And people love it, and as you can see, the massive million-dollar boats that are around there is, kind of, stunning. And it brings a lot of money into this area, I mean it really does, and it's been a catalyst for the growth that you see now.

BRENT LEWIS: How has it... that growth affected the seafood industry?

JASON RUTH: [00:20:29] You know, it... it's... You know, with any growth, there's going to be problems. I mean, I think, you know, we've done a fantastic job of embracing that history that the last remaining oyster house on Kent Narrows has, and it's not something that, you know, might smell or be off-putting to somebody else. It's something that they can really learn from, and that's... You know, it's one of the things I've always promoted on was, like, you know, we have display tags out front with signage, and, you know, we're showing that we're raising oysters. And we invite tours multiple times to really educate the people on what Kent Narrows is and was and... you know, and just the history behind it, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Well, your section, that section that Harrises has, has very much always been a family business, right?

JASON RUTH: [00:21:21] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: Interviewing Captain Billy one time, you know, he told me that... a little bit about the history of the crab, of the seafood business and, you know, the challenges that they faced early on. When did you, kind of, take over the Harris Seafood?

JASON RUTH: [00:21:41] I officially took over in 2004. So before that, I guess I was 20 years old, I just turned 20. And Harrises, you know, the crabs are a big deal for the seafood company, and they had a lot of wholesale customers. Where our biggest customer was in Millers Island, which is just north of Sparrows Point, right around the Sparrows Point area. And the owner suddenly passed away, and so Harrises was at a loss for a sale of crabs. So I, kind of, pitched an idea that maybe they take over that business from the owners or from the...the widow if... take it over and I would run it for them. So they pitched that idea to her, and they opened up the crab house, and it was in... like I said, in Millers Island. And we ran that or I ran that for four years for them until I was roughly 24, 25, yeah, 25. And then, in the meantime, their other biggest customer was a company in Jessup, a big seafood company in Jessup. And they wanted... they needed some help, and so they decided to close the restaurant up, I came back. It

was very successful, but their family... the family members.. the widowed family members wanted to take it over themselves. They were retired at that point, so they took it over. I came back home and then immediately, Mr. Harris, kind of, pimped me out, so to speak, to this other seafood company in Jessup. And I went to work for them on a setup deal for two years for them, so... In the meantime, I got married, had... was working on our second child, really loved the job over there. I got to realize that there's not just rockfish, oysters, clams, and perch in the Bay. That there's many, many, many species of fish up and down the East Coast and in the Chesapeake Bay. And I met a lot of great partners along the way, people that I did business with all the time. So when I came home and Mr. Harris decided to bring me back, that was, kind of like, the part where they were ready to step out. So that was in '98 I came back, just had my second chi-- or my wife and I had our second child. And then he continued to groom me and step away and take over Harris's till the point of 2004, they were 62, they decided to retire. They made me a very lucrative deal. It was basically they just said, "We're walking away, here's some seed money to start, and you just take over our business," so...

BRENT LEWIS: That's awesome.

JASON RUTH: [00:24:28] ...that was it.

BRENT LEWIS: They also, kind of, took a chance by loaning you out that they could have lost you too.

JASON RUTH: [00:24:36] They almost did to be honest with you, I had some great... The funniest thing is, is that, I don't know if it's funny but... So right before I was going back, I got courted by another company to come work for them in a pretty lucrative position and, you know, really high up, and I turned them down, which they were not upset about. But now, that company that I was going to work for is today my biggest company that I sell to, so... And they are a billion-dollar seafood company right here in Maryland that sells all over the country, so... So, you know, the relationships I've built with them and the respect that we had for one another has really been the success... part of the success we have today.

BRENT LEWIS: So those years, you actually were able to network, make connections that have... proved to be beneficial. You also learned a lot about the industry that you weren't aware of. You, kind of, had a perspective of just being here on...

JASON RUTH: [00:25:40] Sure.

BRENT LEWIS: ...in this area, correct?

JASON RUTH: [00:25:42] Yeah, and I... now I can see, oh, there's... you know, there's different facets to the seafood business that I didn't know anything about. The unfortunate part about taking over in 2004 was the actual least amount of oysters that were ever harvested in Maryland. I think it was 16,000 bushels...

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

JASON RUTH: [00:25:59] ...or something like that. Yes, so I came in at the absolute worst time that you could probably get into it, so, and I had a partner at the time. They also offered another person that had been there at Harris's for a long time. They offered him equal ownership, so we split it fifty-fifty, which, you know, was comforting to me, to be honest with you.

BRENT LEWIS: Sure.

JASON RUTH: [00:26:22] But we, kind of, took the company and just using those avenues that I'd found over the years, just, kind of, expanded in different directions. Not the same old stable that had been instilled in us, and, you know, it's going well really.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, and Captain Billy, he was an entrepreneur and innovator,...

JASON RUTH: [00:26:44] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: ...right? Some of the things, like I've understood that he was, kind of, on the cutting edge of distribution technology, am I correct in that?

JASON RUTH: [00:26:56] And he was very... yes, he... Mr. Harri-- Mr. Billy Harris, the one thing that he was great, he loved getting in front of his customers, and he would make... He would spend the entire spring going up and down the East Coast and out west visiting his customers and making sure that they put a name with the face and that, you know, they built a relationship. And that was where he was very good at. And through those relationships, he did the same with trucking companies. And so he pretty much knew if a customer, a new customer called or someone went out of business, which was very... happened a lot during those years. I mean, he would pick their business, and he could make a couple phone calls and know exactly how to get them product [snaps fingers] seamlessly and develop that relationship. And, you know, that new customer was, you know, just very comfortable in not having to worry about anything, and that's what he was good at.

BRENT LEWIS: So those interpersonal relationships were a big part of the business?

JASON RUTH: [00:27:53] Yes, very.

BRENT LEWIS: Still are?

JASON RUTH: [00:27:55] Still are, yes. I mean, you've dealt with watermen a lot, they're all independent businesspeople, a way of looking at it. They all have their own personalities on how they vision... envision things. You have to be very accommodating on all their visions and try to put it all together and be able to work with them. Because, I mean, you're dealing with multiple different contractors basically is what you are. And trying to get all together and all the work and all those pieces come together is very challenging, and he was good at that espe-- very good.

BRENT LEWIS: Interaction, it sounds like, with both the providers and the users of the product.

JASON RUTH: [00:28:35] Correct, correct.

BRENT LEWIS: So when you roll in and, kind of, start taking over the business, what is the...? You say that was, kind of, a low point as far as oysters go.

JASON RUTH: [00:28:48] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: How did you combat that, how...? What was going on at the time, how were you able to think about getting out of that rut?

JASON RUTH: [00:28:57] Well, you know, I did take some lessons that I learned from the Harrises before. I mean, the reason why Harrises is still in business today, 80

years, and the reason why... I mean, there was over 500 oyster-processing companies in Maryland at the turn of the twentieth century. And I mean, and Harris's, this is my tagline that I like to use, we're the last remaining year-round processing oyster plant left in the state. That's a huge feat from 500 to one. The reasons why it was, I mean, the oysters died from MSX [multinuclear sphere X] and Dermo in the lower portions of the bay, and all the successes were in the mid portions of the bay where we were located, so it was all about location, location, location. When the oysters started dying here in Maryland, the Harrises continued on their father's legacy of building relationships. And they went to the next Available East Coast source, which was in Connecticut, and they formed a relationship with a very influential person up there who owned...He was the largest leaseholder in Connecticut. He had 20,000 acres of leased bottom, and him alone was the largest producer of oysters in the entire country at that time in the late '80s, early '90s. So the Harrises had so... They were the main customer for all those oysters, we bought them. We had oysters when nobody else did and, kind of, catapulted them to a next level above everyone else. All the business, kind of, funneled to them. Now, from my... when it happened again in 2004... We had a

little resurgence of oysters in the late '90s. They, kind of, came back, rebounded very nicely, so we, kind of... And Connecticut happened to... their oysters passed away or they all died, so they didn't have any production, we, kind of, fell right back into where we belong. And then in 2004, when they all started dying again, we ended up having to go... I went to the Gulf of Mexico, built some relationships there, and that's the same, just up until the rebound oysters here in, you know, really 2010 is really when it started, so...

MALE 1: Do you know what was killing them in 2004?

JASON RUTH: [00:31:12] Same diseases, MSX and Dermo. It only happens in very dry years. Dermo has been in the bay forever; MSX was introduced by humans. We thought it was wise to bring in the West Coast oyster, it grows well out there, and not... why wouldn't it grow here? We brought it in here without vetting it properly and found out that it harbored this MSX disease, which decimated our population of oysters here, so, you know, human error is to blame, so... And, you know, since that time, we have... You know, much anything with nature, I believe that the MSX has, kind of, worked its way through it, you know it. And they've been more resistant to it, and that's really not an

issue anymore. The Dermo still is around on... you know, occasionally, but it's not as pronounced as it used to be.

BRENT LEWIS: What counts for the rebound, mainly the reduction in those diseases?

JASON RUTH: [00:32:09] You know, we... a couple of things. You know, I'll probably get in trouble for saying this, but, you know, there's been... Since 2010, there's been a huge effort in, as you well know, putting oysters back in the bay, developing areas, and massive amounts of government funding. I mean, you can't quantify how much that helped, but it certainly is in coalition in what they did. So I think it has had some help. We've had three or four years in recent where we've had some of the best spat setting rates ever recorded in the bay, most of it due to weather conditions. So, you know, with Mother Nature and the kick-start that we gave it, I think, you know, we're at levels now that we haven't seen in almost 40 years, so...

BRENT LEWIS: And you were... you guys were leaders in that process.

JASON RUTH: [00:32:59] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: I mean, it's an important part of your business to stay vital and to have product.

JASON RUTH: [00:33:05] Correct.

BRENT LEWIS: So you take some leadership role in that.

JASON RUTH: [00:33:09] Yeah, so in 2010, there were some changes made with everything in the Bay. (A), those sanctuary programs with all the federal funding coming in, and plus, they opened up large areas to leasing in the bay. And we decided it was an opportunity that we would get into that business to be more sustainable for ourselves. So we currently have about 110 acres that we lease personally from the state and then through those advice from the Harrises forever, we develop partnerships with leaseholders throughout the state. So currently, we have about 2200 acres of areas throughout the Bay that we either personally hold or manage for people, and so that's given us our year-round sustainability. We don't purchase any oysters out of state anymore. We use completely Maryland oysters 365 days a year.

BRENT LEWIS: That's something to tout, too...

JASON RUTH: [00:34:04] It is, I mean...

BRENT LEWIS: ...to be able to say.

JASON RUTH: [00:34:06] ...to... That was a goal. I mean, and it's basically fifty-fifty. I shouldn't say fifty-fifty because the demand is so much more in the wintertime, but we're basically harvesting 100,000 to 120,000 bushels of oysters a year off the leased grounds in the summertime.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow, that's awesome. What other seafoods or products do you guys...? You do crabs?

JASON RUTH: [00:34:26] We do crabs, soft-shell clams if... you know, that is a very volatile species. This is the southernmost point in the entire country that they're commercially harvested. And with that being said, is that's because it's very temperamental areas, water quality here, water quality and salinity. So when we have those clams, we have large abundances of them, and we start shucking them, selling them back to areas in the Northeast. And when we don't have them, there is none to be had anywhere, [chuckles] so, which we've been in for the last couple of years. Fortunately for us, those, kind of, abundance of clams have happened at perfect timing when we didn't have many oysters. Like in 2009 during the Katrina when it wiped out the Gulf of Mexico, we had clams to fall back on. Again in, oh, I don't know the exact year, but when the Exxon or the oil spill in the Gulf when they shut all that down, clams were our backup, and it really, kind of, sustained us through real lean times.

MALE 1: Talking about the Harris menu, when did they decide to get into exotic things like alligator?

JASON RUTH: [00:35:42] So understanding the crab business, you know, we run a year-round crab house. We don't have

crabs in Maryland in the summer... in the wintertime, so we had to develop a year-round supply of crabs. And you just can't go to Louisiana and say, "I want to buy crabs for six months, and I don't want to buy them the other six months," you have to develop those relationships. So with that, developing those Louisiana relationships, which, by the way, are some of the most fantastic people in the world. You know, we started piggybacking on a lot of their Cajun cuisines like the alligator, the crawfish, and the hush puppies, and stuff like that that's native to theirs that we find when we go there to visit, that's all we go to eat. We brought those up here, and they're starting to take a little stronghold around here now.

BRENT LEWIS: That's cool, which has always been, kind of, the tradition here locally whereas there's a product that we might... When I was growing up, piss clams, they were bait, right?

JASON RUTH: [00:36:43] Correct, correct.

BRENT LEWIS: Like there wasn't really a market for using them as food here locally, but that changed, right?

JASON RUTH: [00:36:53] Mm-hmm, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: So you guys have to... Just like the watermen themselves, you guys have to be adaptable to the market and

to both the... what can be caught and what can be sold,
right?

JASON RUTH: [00:37:08] Correct, and, you know, like I keep explaining, you know, the lure to the job that I have in owning this company is because the variations that happen so much, the changes. So with that being said, over the years, I am about probably the most diverse business that you see. I mean, we have... Our customer base goes from small retail companies to nationwide grocery chain companies like Sam's Club -- we sell every Sam's Club store in this country -- to food service companies. And then we break that down, you look at our crabs, we wholesale crabs, we retail crabs, we have seven crab feast trailers that we go all over with, so. You know, we do aquaculture, we do wild harvest, it's just... everything is, kind of, like, my investments, I don't put it in my eggs [laughing] in one basket for sure. We break it down to limit that exposure in case of a lean time that we always have something to fall back on.

BRENT LEWIS: Sure, because you're depending on natural factors that you can't necessarily control.

JASON RUTH: [00:38:11] Correct.

BRENT LEWIS: So you're the owner of Harris Seafood, is that your title?

JASON RUTH: [00:38:16] Yes, 2016, my partner that I had, he decided to retire. So we were business partners for 12 years, he stepped away in June of 2016, I took over immediately, I mean completely. I... we had... When we were partners, we had... I was the face of the company, he was the... I was the yes guy and he was the no guy is what it was. I told people yes, he told them no, so... Just because I... I'm the type of person that says, "Yeah, I can do that, hey, no problem, no problem." I need a goal to shoot for, so if I say no, my goal is going to be down here. If I say yes, at least I might not be able to do it 100 percent, but I'm going to try. So that's, kind of, always been my mentality.

BRENT LEWIS: Then... In those regards then, you deal with a lot of, let's call them, subcontractors, the watermen. How many employees do you have?

JASON RUTH: [00:39:09] Currently, we have 48 employees right now.

BRENT LEWIS: Forty-eight employees, that's pretty significant.

JASON RUTH: [00:39:13] Yeah, I mean, it's... it has. I mean, you know, when I took over from the Harrises in 2004, you have to admit, you know, at that time was when the restaurant was really getting its wings and it was... you know, their focus was on that. So their basic-- Harris

Seafood was basically a support system for Harris Crab House. We would buy all their crabs, we would prep them all, we would cook them all for them, all they had to do was sell them, we were the backbone. And the oyster business was just something to fall back on in the wintertime. When I took over, they pulled that away. So that was the one thing they kept, "We're going to keep that restaurant business, you go find your own business," so that's what we did. We went out, we searched for customers, and, you know, found this group of business. I mean, and I'll... I mean, I know times change with, you know, the value of money, but when we took over, the company was like a 2.5-million-dollar-a-year company, and we're... we push 40 million right now, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Awesome, man.

JASON RUTH: [00:40:17] So it... you know, it certainly made great strides, and, you know, the price of seafood has gone up as well, but still it's... You know, we do a lot with crabs. We actually own another company in Louisiana. I saw the need a few years ago that, you know, the problem was that I would have... I would... Every spring I would start to get crabs. They were not the best quality because that's just the nature of the crab that time of year. I would beg people to buy them where I couldn't make money on

it. By the time I finally had good crabs and they wanted them in September or October, then, that's when the business fell apart, and I'm basically giving away again just to keep the watermen happy. And I decided that I need to, kind of, smooth out the edges here. So I went down last year, 2023, purchased a building in Louisiana in a good area. Got a great team of people to work for me, and we have 25 watermen there now that which... I wanted to start small, which didn't end that way. We have 25 at that location, and now, we have two more locations, so... I mean, at times, it's 600 bushels a day is what it is...

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

JASON RUTH: [00:41:28] ...just of crabs, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Driving them up?

JASON RUTH: [00:41:31] Yep...

BRENT LEWIS: ...you...

JASON RUTH: [00:41:31] ...we developed a trucking system, two drivers. Like the truck loaded yesterday, it was 350 bushels yesterday, left at five o'clock last night. It'll be in here at... it's unloading right now, so...

MALE 1: What's the percentage of death... of the death rate of seafood traveling back...?

JASON RUTH: [00:41:49] It's actually greater here in Maryland than it is down there. They do it different in Louisiana.

So the what... The part I had, I require my boats, they're not allowed to grade crabs. So they shake their pots, and we have crates set up, so, and they stick them inside of a cooler with ice water in it. The pot comes out of the water, they shake them right into the ice water. The crab immediately pulls its fins in and doesn't bother anything. Put a top on them, we take them to shore, they're iced again, my team of guys grades them to my specs, which is unheard of.

BRENT LEWIS: So it's a business...

JASON RUTH: [00:42:25] It's a business...

BRENT LEWIS: ...decision not to let them grade?

JASON RUTH: [00:42:27] Correct, that's a common practice in Louisiana. That's the business decision about making them ice on the boat. I give them the free ice, you use it, guarantee it's going to be easy for you in the long run, they like it that way. So the crabs, they come out of the water, they go right into a bo-- a crate. We grade them again, they go right into a box. Every one of them look like soft crabs in there, they're just laid in the... in a box like, yeah, they're not out to bite each other, and the shelf life is actually greater because of that.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow.

MALE 1: That's cool.

BRENT LEWIS: So, basically, you deal with production of the product, packaging, distribution.

JASON RUTH: [00:43:02] Mm-hmm.

BRENT LEWIS: Those seem like the three components of what you do?

JASON RUTH: [00:43:07] Yeah, I don't have to pick much up anymore, so it's... [laughing]

BRENT LEWIS: What... So what takes most of your time during the day, like in your job?

JASON RUTH: [00:43:18] You know, most of my day is a lot... I'll be honest with you, a lot of what I do takes care of itself every day. It's a specific pattern, you know what's going to happen, if everybody does their job, I'm good. So, for me, most of my day is continued on, mainly just sales and building those relationships with the customers that I currently have. Making sure that they have what they need, putting out any fires that might be, and then...and then working on new business at the same time, that's...

BRENT LEWIS: So those relationships are still very important?

JASON RUTH: [00:43:51] Very important.

BRENT LEWIS: Not only for your distribution, but I imagine you mentioned a few minutes ago that sometimes, you have to do

things just to keep your watermen happy, just to make sure that they're in your... on your side, kind of, right?

JASON RUTH: [00:44:10] Yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: Because you're dealing with strong personalities...

JASON RUTH: [00:44:12] Correct.

BRENT LEWIS: ...typically?

JASON RUTH: [00:44:14] And they... you know, there's a lot of thing they're looking for as a... from a waterman side. I mean, yes, do they care about that relationship with me? That's probably not, but what they want is the best market and the best price. So as long as I ensure them or give the feeling that I'm giving them 100 percent all the time and I'm there for them, I don't have anything to worry about with them. They'll be loyal to me all day long, and that's what you learn for in a business, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Right, because it's a business relationship.

JASON RUTH: [00:44:42] It is, correct.

BRENT LEWIS: What do you count as the biggest changes in the industry?

JASON RUTH: [00:44:50] The biggest changes, you know, is not good, in my opinion. You know, there's so much oversight in what we do, you know, from a regulatory standpoint. I mean, you know, I have the DNR, the Department of Natural

Resources, that's... you know, they don't particularly want to... You know, as you know, as a kid, you know, the DNR was in boats every day checking the watermen every day. They don't like to do that anymore, they'd rather sit in my parking lot every day and do that, it's easier for them, which is whatever, I'm not... we're not trying to break any laws.

BRENT LEWIS: Right.

JASON RUTH: [00:45:27] You know, and we have... You know, I have county health department, the state health department, the FDA [United States Food and Drug Administration], all get quarterly inspections in my place unannounced. We have a third-party auditing company that comes in once a year unannounced. And just the red tape that's associated with the business is the real, real thing. It just gets worse every day. Everyone's behind a desk has... doesn't understand the business, but they think by moving their pencil that they actually can.

BRENT LEWIS: So you think that's some of the biggest challenges...

JASON RUTH: [00:45:58] It is...

BRENT LEWIS: ...that your industry faces?

JASON RUTH: [00:45:59] You know for me in business, my successes are based on making off-the-cuff decisions, using

the best knowledge that I have in my head. Nobody else in government makes that decision. It has to be studied and studied and studied and studied. And then they'll put it to a panel and then it ends up being really just muddled down to, watered down to nothing anymore.

BRENT LEWIS: And you may even end up at the same place that your gut indicated...

JASON RUTH: [00:46:25] Told you in the first place.

BRENT LEWIS: ...in the first place.

JASON RUTH: [00:46:27] Right, so I spend a lot of time on commissions and panels discussing the same topic over and over that gets you really nowhere. But I do it just so I'm knowledgeable, (1), and, (b), to be supportive of the watermen so that they're not getting railroaded at the same time.

BRENT LEWIS: Right, they seem to have gotten better, the watermen, in uniting,...

JASON RUTH: [00:46:49] They have.

BRENT LEWIS: ...right? Because there are independent-minded people typically and historically had a hard time.

JASON RUTH: [00:46:56] Correct, and that's... I've been trying to... You know the old adage safety in numbers is... applies to them more than they know and they... You know, I always try to express to them that they need to

be... find some unity, you know. Whether you can agree with that person, you know, get him to sign up to your organization, get him a part of it, you know, so that you can have that voice that speaks for yourselves.

BRENT LEWIS: The associations can help, right?

JASON RUTH: [00:47:23] Mm-hmm, correct.

BRENT LEWIS: They seem to be... Queen Anne's county Watermen's Association seems to be very active...

JASON RUTH: [00:47:30] Very active.

BRENT LEWIS: ...both politically and in the community, which brings me to that question, you know, does the community understand the business, the watermen, the industry?

JASON RUTH: [00:47:47] You know it's... I've said this a lot of times, but I think the perception of... to the public that watermen are pirates, you know, they're just out here raping and pillaging the Bay is something they haven't quite overcome yet. You know, and that's... and it's bad because, I mean, you know, a lot of negative press goes a lot farther than good press all the time. And I think that's a hurdle that they are slowly overcoming, you know, being good stewards of their own product, you know. Now that... you know, now that we're trying to tell these stories in a sense that... Like watermen for instance, I mean the public would not know that they get hundreds of

thousands of dollars a year from self-imposed license fees so that they can replant oysters in the Chesapeake Bay, not many people know that story. And, you know, so they're actually investing in their selves and stuff like that, so it, kind of, takes the whole piracy out of it, but it's hard to get past that. And, you know, they've done a much better job over the last few years in, kind of, getting...getting forward with it, but I don't think they're really to the point yet.

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, like you said, any bad news story that comes along paints everyone with the same brush...

JASON RUTH: [00:48:59] Sure,...

BRENT LEWIS: ...kind of.

JASON RUTH: [00:49:00]...exactly, exactly.

BRENT LEWIS: So you've known a lot of watermen in your career. When you look back, do... are there people who stand out to you as being exceptional and if so, who are they and why do they stand out to you?

JASON RUTH: [00:49:16] You know there is... I mean there's plenty of people that I find exceptional. I guess what, kind of, draws me to these people, I'll give you a case in point, it is a work ethic more than anything. Ian, you want me to say names?

BRENT LEWIS: Yes, you...

JASON RUTH: [00:49:35] Okay, okay.

BRENT LEWIS: ...if you're comfortable with that.

JASON RUTH: [00:49:37] Ian Horney is probably, in my opinion, the very best waterman on the Bay. Not because he has some special gift, but the fact that he goes to work, and that's what he goes for. His drive, good weather, bad weather, he is going to work. It doesn't matter if there's a lot of oysters or a few oysters, he is going to put his eight hours or 10 hours in a day until he's done. And, you know, it's very challenging for me, and he'll... If he was here today, he would repeat this story. But, you know, there's times in my business that I can't purchase everything that everybody's catching. We have to take lay days, and I did that quite often, I mean, everybody has to do it. But Ian came to me one day, and that... I gave him a lay day, I gave everybody off that day, and he said, "I'm going to tell you something, I give a 100 percent to you every day." I said, "Yeah, you do." He said, "So I need a 100 percent from you every day, and you buying oysters from that company over there and making me stay home is not going to fly." And I said, "You're 100 percent right," and I said, "so you'll never have a day off again," so... And that's been four years now, and it's understood that when I tell no market tomorrow to anybody, he goes to work, and that's

just... and that's the respect that I give him. And I... and, you know, and the ones that... You know, you've been around here for a long time, it used to be you had to ask for market before you started a season crab and oyster. Because I'm the only one basically left, there's really no need to ask, you just come here. But the ones that are loyal to me... Like it's very easy to go to Deal Island and sell your oysters there because you live in Centerville and you don't want to have to drive the extra 20 miles. But the people that do and bring them to me, I give them a little extra money, and I make sure they go to work every day. And so that's kind of... that's the kind of people that are willing to give to me as much as I want... I can give to them, and that's who I would call the best watermen.

BRENT LEWIS: Whereas historically in Kent Narrows when there were innumerable packing houses, you know, people might bounce around a little more,...

JASON RUTH: [00:51:53] Yeah, it was...

BRENT LEWIS: ...right? Whoever had the best...

JASON RUTH: [00:51:56] ...it was common practice that if you needed oysters, you just paid 10 cents more or 25 cents more than somebody else...

BRENT LEWIS: Right...

JASON RUTH: [00:52:02] ...all the boats would come over...

BRENT LEWIS: ...Jean Stelmach and some of those, right?

JASON RUTH: [00:52:04] Yeah, exactly. They'd put a flag up, and the boats would go in there that day, or if you didn't have market here today, you go to call that dock, you know. And it's funny because in Louisiana with those crabbers there, that's how it is, there's ze-- and it's understood that way. It's hard for me to grasp, but there's no loyalty. If you are the cheapest guy in town, you're not going to get any crabs. If you... I pay a quarter less than anybody else, I'm not going to get any. If I need them, I pay 50 cents more, they all come from every direction, they'll bring... they'll come 100 miles away just to bring you crabs. That's how it is. And it's... nobody gets mad, it's just...

BRENT LEWIS: Right...

JASON RUTH: [00:52:41] ...the way it works.

BRENT LEWIS: ...just the way it works. Whereas here, again, just by mainly being the only game in town, in some ways, right, that...?

JASON RUTH: [00:52:49] Right.

BRENT LEWIS: Now, do you see new watermen?

JASON RUTH: [00:52:54] Some, you know, most of what you do see is people within particular families, you know, that

are watermen or, you know, new watermen of old watermen kind of thing.

BRENT LEWIS: Grew up in...

JASON RUTH: [00:53:06] Grew up in the business, all they really ever knew. But, you know, the ones you see now, you see a lot of new watermen in the sense that, you know, dredging for oysters has been popular the last few years, it's ease, it's easy, you know. You can get into it in a couple months, you know. Say, you're a firefighter that works a 24-hour shift and you've got three more days off, I can get an oyster license and go oystering for three days and make some extra money.

BRENT LEWIS: Which has certainly become expensive too, right...

JASON RUTH: [00:53:32] It has, yeah,...

BRENT LEWIS: ...to get into the business?

JASON RUTH: [00:53:34] ...it has, and that's kind of the... You know, in discussions with watermen over the years, the reason why these license fees have gotten so expensive, because they want people to be invested, so they keep raising the price. I mean, the watermen put a self-imposed dollar... a dollar increase in tax on a bushel of oysters this year just so that... because that money comes back to them, so we got more money. It's going to cost us more,

but we got more money in our savings account now to go plant oysters for our future, so, you know. And that's where you're seeing the new people come online. There is a cap on how many people you can have, but pretty much every available license is being used right now.

BRENT LEWIS: So, and how many oystermen do you work with on a given day let's say?

JASON RUTH: [00:54:18] On a given day, I mean we have... and I'm just going to say boats because it's... some people have two...

BRENT LEWIS: [unclear]

JASON RUTH: [00:54:26]...and... two and three people on a boat, but it's 25 to 30 at our place every day. We have 15 on our dock and location in Deal Island... at our dock in Deal Island. We have one at... some in Taylors Island. It's probably 150 people total, I would say.

BRENT LEWIS: You measure oysters by the bushel?

JASON RUTH: [00:54:50] Mm-hmm, by the bushel.

BRENT LEWIS: How many bushels...?

JASON RUTH: [00:54:53] In a year?

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah.

JASON RUTH: [00:54:55] In a wild season, we were running about 180 to 200,000 bushels.

BRENT LEWIS: Wow, that's impressive.

JASON RUTH: [00:55:04] So it's about a third of the harvest in Maryland last year.

BRENT LEWIS: How can the community support... help support the industry?

JASON RUTH: [00:55:15] That's a very good question. You know, supporting, I think how the community could support the industry, I'll break it down in two things. So to support the watermen as a sidebar of the industry, I mean, to continue to support their fundraising efforts. You know, go to their crab feast, go to their boat docking contest, learn about them really. Stop down, go talk to a waterman one day, and learn what he's actually doing, you'll be completely shocked. I mean, people walk into my place, and I give them the 10-cent dog and pony show, and they're just... they walk away shocked and amazed that I did... all that stuff happens right there. So I mean, you know, before you critique someone or make an opinion of them, learn about them first would be my thing, how the public could do better. And then, you know, for my industry, which is very important, is that to support... Know where your seafood's coming from for one, and then support those products that are grown here in the Chesapeake Bay, whether it be, you know, oysters, crabs in particular. You know, the crabmeat industry is in dire

straits. You know, we have to outsource all our labor, which is increasingly hard to get every year. And then the imports that come into this country from Venezuela have pretty much taken over 90 percent of the market. So know where your crabmeat comes from, demand, you know, Chesapeake Bay crabmeat, and if it's not around, don't purchase it.

MALE 1: [00:56:43] You get the impression that people have no idea where their seafood's coming from?

JASON RUTH: [00:56:46] They have no idea. I mean, okay, I'll use this in relative to oysters. You know, you'll have so... I get people all the time come into my place, "Oh, what's the name of your oysters?" I'm like, "Uh, I... whatever you want to call them." And they're like, "Uh, because we only eat Pickle Point's" or something like that. And I'm like, "You know, there's only one species of oysters raised from Prince Edward Island to Venezuela, okay?" And it's... you know, it's like taking a Cabernet grape and growing it in Napa Valley and growing it in Saint Michael's, it's still a Cabernet grape, but it's going to taste different. And if you have the palate, which I do not, to taste those little nuances and form some fancy little name to it, help yourself. I have five brand names, and they're all the exact, same oyster, there's no

difference to them. But people say, "Oh, I need a name," "Oh, these are Roaring Point," so I make up a little logo, stick it on a bag, and they're, "Oh, yeah." And they'll serve all three or five different kinds and...

BRENT LEWIS: And they'll swear that's the one that...

MALE 1: That's exactly how people buy bottles of wine.

JASON RUTH: [00:57:50] It's... they don't know.

MALE 1: It's the label.

JASON RUTH: [00:57:51] Yeah, so they don't know how it is, right?

MALE 1: Yeah, right.

JASON RUTH: [00:57:54] Yeah, and it's... If I put five oysters there and said, "This one's going to have a raspberry finish with woodsy after tones," the guys would...

MALE 1: They'll taste it.

JASON RUTH: [00:58:02] ..."Oh my God, I can taste it."

BRENT LEWIS: And if you're looking at a menu and it says, "Maryland Crab Cake," your mind thinks, oh, well, that's Maryland crabmeat.

JASON RUTH: [00:58:11] Yes, exactly.

BRENT LEWIS: And that's not necessarily...

JASON RUTH: [00:58:13] It's not necessarily the case.

BRENT LEWIS: ...the case.

JASON RUTH: [00:58:14] I mean if you look at... And there is no Maryland produced crabmeat right now. So if you look at it, in the summertime last year, we'll use that, Maryland crabmeat, Maryland Jumbo Lump was 30 dollars a pound, 34 dollars a pound, Venezuelan Jumbo Lump was 18. And the Venezuelan actually looks better, it's got beautiful, big lumps in there, people buy with their eyes, you know. You... Oh, look at your crab cake and you see a lump of crabmeat like that, "Oh, this must be Maryland, it must come from the Wye River." That's every... everybody comes to me, "Oh, your crab's from the Wye River?", "No."

MALE 1: Is it illegal for a restaurant... can they state Maryland crab cake if the meat... none of it is from Maryland?

JASON RUTH: [00:58:54] No.

MALE 1: Are there any legalities about that?

JASON RUTH: [00:58:56] No.

MALE 1: It doesn't matter.

BRENT LEWIS: They're not allowed to.

JASON RUTH: [00:58:58] They're not allowed to state...

MALE 1: Oh...

JASON RUTH: [00:58:59] That's why they say Maryland-style crab cake.

MALE 1: Maryland style, got you.

JASON RUTH: [00:59:04] Mm-hmm, and, you know, they're... So, like, I would love to see a lull.... Like get back to Louisiana, I was down there a few weeks ago, and, you know, import shrimp are terrible for that business down there, they're fighting it left and right. You know, you can get Indian shrimp for pennies on the dollar, and that's a state law in Louisiana. If you use anything other than Louisiana shrimp, it has to state so on the menu, and they'll put in quotation marks, "Shrimps scampi, imported" right next to it, so, I mean...

BRENT LEWIS: So you'd like to see us...

JASON RUTH: [00:59:33] I'd like to see...

BRENT LEWIS: ... doing that?

JASON RUTH: [00:59:34] At least, at least that would help with the education level, so people could make informed decisions on themselves. Because they're just blind right now, they don't know, they have no clue.

BRENT LEWIS: Which brings me to the question, what do you see as the future of the industry? What what's going to happen over the next decade, let's say, in the local seafood market?

JASON RUTH: [00:59:56] In the next decade, I'll look at that as short term, you know, there's going to be increasing problems. You know, again, I don't want to get political,

but legal immigration is not accepted, but illegal immigration is. So, you know, these picking houses that, you know, use this H-2B labor, they're going to be in bad shape. That industry in Hoopers Island is going to slowly disappear in the next 10 years in my opinion...

BRENT LEWIS: Because of workforce?

JASON RUTH: [01:00:31] Because of workforce. It's... So what they do now, and I was in this program for... We were in it for 17 years, we brought up 30 people a year. We housed them, we took them to church, we took them to the store every week, they were very good friends of mine. And they lived... I had a house in... on my property that... in that log cabin that they lived in, great people. But the government made it increasingly hard for me to bring them in. (1), you had to develop a need, which there was nobody to apply for a job to shuck oysters. (B), because I had a need, I had to pay them federal pay scales, and because we live in Queen Anne's County, and that is a metropolitan area in the eyes of this federal government, my pay rate went from 13.50 an hour to 22 bucks in one year. And I was unable to sustain that to shuck oysters for a living. And you weren't required to pay your current employees that, you only had to pay the migrant workers. And I was like, you know what, I'm not going to have that

disparity in there. It's almost discrimination in my mind, so I just said, I'm going to get out of this program. And that's some of the things that those crabmeat pants... plants are finding right now, is that their rates are going up every year. They're having to charge more for the crabmeat because it costs them more to produce it. And it puts them in farther disparity between the price of imported crabmeat.

BRENT LEWIS: Has that difference allowed you to hire more local?

JASON RUTH: [01:02:04] It has. We, kind of, just focused on hiring more locals, and a lot of what we have anymore is just we... And we very rarely get above 30 shuckers right now. We'll get more in the winter when, you know, some businesses are closed up, landscaping companies, stuff like that. We'll get some extra people, and they leave in the summertime, which is fine. But, yeah, but if you look at my workforce, and you... you'll walk in there, and it's going to see... you're going to see a bunch of young workers that, you know, this is their second job or they might work at a restaurant at night, and they come here during the day to make extra money. And you're going to see about half of them are over 70 years old that are... you know, were on Social Security, been doing it all their

lives, local, been shucking oysters since they were a kid.

And so when those people are gone, that's when you're going to start to see a difference in my business, so...

BRENT LEWIS: Because it is skilled labor.

JASON RUTH: [01:03:04] It...

BRENT LEWIS: People don't, I mean...

JASON RUTH: [01:03:05] It is skilled, there's a knack to it, there's a knack. The skill is that to do it and make money at it is the skill. Anybody can shuck an oyster, but can you do it to make money and stand there for six and seven hours a day repeatedly doing the exact same procedure over?

BRENT LEWIS: As quickly as...

JASON RUTH: [01:03:20] As quickly as possible.

BRENT LEWIS: ...as possible. So that's the short-term view, 10 years or so. What do you see as the long-term for your future?

JASON RUTH: [01:03:31] Long term, if... you know, if we continue to have successes in the, you know, repopulation in the oyster business, you know, we get past this hurdle of disease and stuff like that, and the Bay starts to become a little healthier. I think that, you know, the business really doesn't have any limitations, so to speak. We might have to figure out a new way to produce product, whether it be mechanically, some sort of innovation like

that. But...I think the business is... you know, and if the product is there, it's sustainable. What I do see is that, you know, most of your target audience for shucked oysters, the two products that we do, shucked oysters and oysters in the shell, we lose about 10 percent of those people a year. You and I grow up eating fried oysters, oyster stew, those products are not looked upon as health conscious right now. So in this healthy climate that we have of nuts and berries and celery stalks for dinner, you know, fried food is not or dairy products is not an option. So, we are losing, as the demographic gets older and dies off, we are losing a... But, you know, the renaissance that we're really seeing is in the raw oysters, you know, the boutique stuff is where we really see growth.

BRENT LEWIS: So, you guys have to be adaptable...

JASON RUTH: [01:04:57] We have to be...

BRENT LEWIS: ...to...

JASON RUTH: [01:04:57] ...yes. And I'd love to just shuck every oyster...

BRENT LEWIS: ... [unclear] taste?

JASON RUTH: [01:05:00] ...and put them in a can and send them up the road, but we really have to be adaptive to it.

BRENT LEWIS: You... Does anybody in your family, any of your kids, or, like, in the future, who would you be handing...?

JASON RUTH: [01:05:14] That's a great question. My children, my three children all have professional degrees and careers, and they don't... They saw how hard their father worked, so that the lure of the cash in your pocket is not as great to them as it was for me in those early ages. But, you know, I do have, I have some prospects. You know, I have some young employees that if they continue on the path that they're... and then they wanted, I will certainly offer them the same opportunities that I was given. But if not, you know, there's two ways of looking at it. I can continue to grow it until it gets to a point where it's attractive to a bigger company and just let it go, you know, so...

BRENT LEWIS: It depends on timing and what's going on, when you decide to retire...

JASON RUTH: [01:06:00] Yeah...

BRENT LEWIS: ...all of that good stuff?

JASON RUTH: [01:06:01] ...because that... And in reality, my... the business that we have on the Kent Narrows does not need to be on the Kent Narrows. That being on the water is a curse more than it is an action attribute right now because...

BRENT LEWIS: Why so?

JASON RUTH: [01:06:15] Oh, there's so many additional factors, tides, winds, you know, you got to deal with Mother Nature on a firsthand basis, not behind some trees or behind a building. So, you know, it doesn't... There was a need for that because when there was 26 oyster houses on the Kent Narrows, it was all about convenience and price. There's no need for convenience now. I'm the only guy, so they'd have to put them in their pickup trucks and bring them to me which...

BRENT LEWIS: You can run your business pretty much...

JASON RUTH: [01:06:43] Correct.

BRENT LEWIS: out of any facility.

JASON RUTH: [01:06:45] Pretty much.

BRENT LEWIS: But it seems to me that that high profile that you guys have there, there's just probably some benefit to that.

JASON RUTH: [01:06:55] It's, you know, one of the biggest attributes that we have, especially when obtaining new customers, and I bring them in for a tour. One of the first things I do is I walk them into my office, and I set them down at my desk, which has a big bay window that looks over the Kent Narrows. And they all go, "Wow, it sure is nice to work here all day long." And just that comforting feeling they get by walking in that place is one of the

biggest thing that... things I get out of it, so... I mean, it's great, don't get me wrong, but it can be... the business model can be, you know, done somewhere else, so to speak...

BRENT LEWIS: That physical connection to the water is a perception...

JASON RUTH: [01:07:36] It is.

BRENT LEWIS: People respond to that.

JASON RUTH: [01:07:39] Right, and it's... you know, and for the restaurant, it's great for them because it really gives that whole farm-to-table aspect when you can see a boat pull up in front. And we've, kind of, capitalized on that over the last few years through some great marketing programs and just, you know, show people that, yes, a waterman's going to unload your product right there, and it's going to get processed in here and to you the next day and that you're consuming, and you can't get any fresher in that, so... You know, it's a real, real treat for that. So I think, you know, going forward, there'll always be something there despite... You know, I think the family's... because I am not family, basically, the family's wish is to continue on that legacy of Mr. Harris's alive and well, and they look... No point in really getting rid of that. But, you know, the growth in the

business would have to be... we'd have to move or move parts of it to different locations.

BRENT LEWIS: And the value of the real estate comes into play.

JASON RUTH: [01:08:36] Yeah, and that would be a family decision. I don't own the bus-- I don't own the pro--...

BRENT LEWIS: You own the business, not the property.

JASON RUTH: [01:08:41] Not the property, correct.

BRENT LEWIS: Is there anything that I didn't ask you or that we didn't talk about that you'd like to share or you think that the community should know about the industry?

JASON RUTH: [01:08:54] You know, I just like to reiterate the fact that, you know, it is as... Despite what it might sound like today, it is a dying industry both from the waterman side and from the industry, meaning being the last one remaining. So whatever the community can do and the general public to actually support that and embrace it would be... is the one thing that we really need to... for it to continue. Because, I mean, you look at the seal of Maryland, and there's a farmer and a fisherman, and without the fisherman and the guy to produce it, there's no need to have that on there anymore and that's...

BRENT LEWIS: Yeah, with the Chesapeake Bay being such a resource, you know, it's part of our identity, which is culturally important.

JASON RUTH: [01:09:43] Mm-hmm, it's always funny, people say all the time, you know, because they always use this analogy that "When Captain John Smith sailed up to Chesapeake Bay, you know, the water was so clear and..." you know. And I said, well, you know... How do you get that water quality back to where it was when Captain John Smith's here? And I very easily say, "Well, you take the 20 million people of that live and breathe [laughing] I mean..."

BRENT LEWIS: [both speaking-unclear] watershed...

JASON RUTH: [01:10:07] "...and move them somewhere else, and it'll clear up on its own," and they go, "Oh, we can't do that," "Exactly." So, how do we do it? We do the best practices possible. You know, we're never going to get to the Captain John Smith time, but let's do what we can now to help protect it.

BRENT LEWIS: Well, and historically, people would do whatever they want it to do without really thinking about the future. Whereas we can certainly complain about bureaucracy and... but at least things are thought through to some degree now, right?

JASON RUTH: [01:10:36] Yes, yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: But even Kent Narrows, northern Kent Narrows, has... the landscape has changed over the decades. I've

had, you know, watermen in their eighties and nineties tell me that when they were kids, Kent Narrows looked completely different as far as the way that the land lays. And so those are things that you can't go back and change.

JASON RUTH: [01:10:57] No, you can't.

BRENT LEWIS: Awesome, thanks, man.

JASON RUTH: [01:10:59] You're welcome.

BRENT LEWIS: I think this was...

JASON RUTH: [01:11:00] Oh yeah.

BRENT LEWIS: ... you know, I really appreciate you doing it,
so...

JASON RUTH: [01:11:04] Oh, I like to talk...

BRENT LEWIS: ...[I thank?] you for it.

JASON RUTH: [01:11:04] ...you see that, so...

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