The Miller family of Oak Island are aquaculture pioneers, the first from Brunswick County to farm-raise oysters for commercial production. Brothers James and Darrell Miller started Old Baldy Aquaculture in 2011, after spending many years in commercial fishing and in industrial engineering. Their other jobs are as engineers for a plastics company.

“We used to shrimp and fish flounder,” James said. “But we wanted to do something different, something sustainable. It was really Darrell’s idea, and we wanted to do something for our kids to have a job.”

James said it’s for two reasons. First, not every seedling they plant is a true triploid. A very few diploids—meaning they have three sets of chromosomes. These hybrid oysters don’t reproduce, so the energy they would use for making babies instead goes into making bigger oysters.

That means the bivalves reach marketable length in only one year. The Millers have a second home on Oak Island, and are the county’s first commercial oyster farmers. James said he spent a considerable amount of time studying wild oysters while working their farm. “People always ask us what we’re doing,” James said. “We tell them we’re breeding mermaids.”

James said he spent a considerable amount of time studying the ultrasound and other characteristics of the water before leasing land at The Basin. Although the water is of good quality, the Millers have found a welcome market, however. Chef Danny Bolz of Wilmington’s Fish Bites Restaurant is a major customer, as is service industry giant Sysco Corp. More information about the venture is available at the website www.oldbaldyaquaculture.com.

In the wild, it takes diploid oysters about three years to reach three inches. The Millers raise oysters that are triploid—meaning they have three sets of chromosomes. These hybrid oysters don’t reproduce, so the energy they would use for making babies instead goes into making bigger oysters.

That means the bivalves reach marketable size in only one year, and the farmers never let them grow more than two years to minimize the threat of disease. Also, the triploid oysters can be safely harvested year-round, even in the heat of the summer, since the heat has a big freeze kept at 43 degrees.

The farmed oysters have the salty, bright merrior (sea taste) preferred by professional chefs for their consistent flavor and texture. A single with a one- to one-and-a-half-inch meat cup, the Millers said, is perfect single with a one- to one-and-a-half-inch meat cup, preferred by professional chefs for their consistent flavor and texture. A single with a one- to one-and-a-half-inch meat cup, preferred by professional chefs for their consistent flavor and texture.

The farmers must unlock the cages using specially made wrenches. (Photos by Lee Hinnant)