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## From fish farm to plate

### Aquaculture Center on the brink of commercialization

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The University of North Carolina Wilmington (UNCW) Aquaculture Center in Wrightsville Beach, working with other institutions like N.C. State, is fine-tuning a pilot program that will get its cultivated black sea bass onto restaurant tables and into the marketplace.

Since last spring, approximately 80 restaurants across the state have tried the harvested fish and have been a part of a marketing survey to determine market price, market demand and market potential, said Dr. Wade Watanabe, research professor and aquaculture program coordinator for UNCW. This project has been nine years in the making.

"We've gradually, over the years, been able to work out the techniques for spawning these fish in captivity and raising the eggs to full marketable stages," Watanabe said. "... We've reached a point where there's commercial interest in our progress, and a couple of potential commercial practitioners are serious enough that they want to establish start-up farms."

One pilot project being incubated at the center is a collaboration with Aquaplantations, a Wilmington company, led by proprietor Ted Davis.

"We're doing a pilot project on site ... to demonstrate growing these fish out at the marketable sizes, and by working with us, he would receive training in raising these fish," Watanabe said. "He's going to support all the operational costs, and he's also going to derive the benefit of selling the fish at the end. But be-



STAFF PHOTO | JOSHUA CURRY

**At the UNCW Aquaculture Center in Wrightsville Beach, a pilot program is in progress to commercialize the center's cultivated black sea bass.**

cause we are working together, we get the benefit of all the hard data on production and operational characteristics of the system. ... So, in the end, we go up the learning curve together, and this information is going to be useful as we try to extend it to other prospective practitioners down the road."

Davis has a site in Wilmington to harvest the fish but is holding off until the pilot program is running smoothly. He is also doing his own marketing trials with restaurants like the Bridge Tender, which is getting the black sea bass at a promotional cost.

UNCW's Dr. Daniel Baden, executive principal for the MARBIONC

program, is part of the program that provides the funding to the aquaculture center, which is one of three focus areas of the MARBIONC program.

MARBIONC is an economic development engine that has become associated with UNCW, seeking to create new jobs, new business and newly trained individuals using marine resources, Baden said.

"One of the reasons that one looks at cultivating fish in closed cultivated settings, is we are releasing pressure on wild-caught stocks of fish," he said. "... The ocean food source is diminishing, diminishing, diminishing. And that's because we have increasingly efficient fishing gear and increasing pressure by the number of boats that are out there collecting, catching fish for consumption. And so this is a way that if one can cultivate, you can reduce the pressure on the wild-caught stocks."

He also said the aquaculture center is on the leading edge of science with the research and sale of flounder larvae. Since flounder start out with one eye on each side, and one eye later migrates to the other side, the tissue remodeling that takes place has potential in regards to humans.

"It (flounder larvae) is developing as a biomedical model for human disfigurement, so this is potentially a pretty big deal," Baden said.

The cultivation of ocean fish, he said, is on the brink of becoming a huge commercial market, but it is still in its initial stages.

"This (pilot program) is attempting to make commercially viable the cultivation of fish," Baden said.