

A resolute mussel farmer

Amélie Dennebouy has challenged gender stereotypes to become a successful mussel entrepreneur in Pénestin, France

“We don’t employ women!” Just how many times Amélie Dennebouy, a mussel farm worker, heard that phrase since she began working in the sector at age 17, it would be impossible to say. “Ten years ago, I realised that it would be difficult to find employment in the production segment because I am a woman,” says Amélie.

Stories flood her mind: managers laughing at her when she handed in an application for work as a production worker, pushing her to the sales department instead; the crude questioning of some: “Have you passed under the desk?”

“For four years now, I have been trying to get a job in the coquilles Saint-Jacques (scallops) operations. I have good credentials from three managers, to no avail. They are disappointed and now understand my situation.”

Amélie Dennebouy remains undeterred. Indeed, the obstacles along the way seem to have reinforced her determination to do what she likes. It all started at high school. Her father worked for Veolia, a French multinational corporation. Her mother was a social care worker. As a teenager, she followed a general education curriculum in Le Mans, spending her holidays on the Normandy coast.

Then she decided to study marine farming and obtain a professional baccalauréat degree. This took place way down on the Breton coast at Guérande, 25 km from Pénestin. She went on for a BTS (higher technical certificate), which included a number of practical placements. While Amélie was looking for smaller outfits, only large enterprises would take her in. In order to broaden her perception of things, she took care to move to different locations, between Normandy and Vendée.

She observed the techniques in use, the equipment which varies from one sector or enterprise to another. She discovered machines that automatically fill the tubular nets with young mussels. “It is a waste of time to do that by hand,” she says. “I convinced one of the managers to buy one, and she does not regret that decision at all.”

Amélie went on to acquire a slew of qualifications: diving certification, boat master certification for marine culture – Level 1, Capitaine 200 for small-scale fishery, and a licence for elvers or glass eel. She makes it a point to be present at all the mussel seasons, and also in the markets.

In 2016, Amélie chose to settle down in Pénestin in Brittany, France, Amélie kept looking for a CDI (Contract Duration Indeterminée, that is, a permanent contract) but had to make do with CDDs (Contract Duration Déterminée, that is, a temporary or fixed-term contract). One day, however, a mussel farmer of the area, named Yvan Bizeul, informed her that he was about to sell. A deal was concluded, and to ensure a smooth transition both of them committed to working together for three years. The agreement was signed but uncertainties remained. Says Amélie, “As I am not the daughter of Mr so-and-so, nor a native of Pénestin, I was told that I wouldn’t be able to cope, and that I should hire somebody to look after the production.” It was not easy convincing the bank either that a woman too could make the whole thing work, including the production side...

Amélie has gone through her first mussel season, during which she herself fixed the stockings around the poles. “It’s rather stressful,” she says, “although I feel I am in a supportive environment. But,” she notes ironically, “now that the business transfer is on, I have been offered several CDIs!” 🙄

This article was originally published in Cultures Marines, No 336, May 2020 under the title, ‘Una mytilicultrice a la tetedure’ by Julie Lallouët-Geffroy, https://www.infomer.fr/cultures_marines/cultures_marines.php

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