

# Robb Report

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## CAR OF THE YEAR



FEBRUARY 2008



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## Lifting the Shell

*Chuck Hesse is introducing the world to the taste of farm-raised conch.*

CHUCK HESSE had planned to sail around the world, but he took a detour to a then-obscure Caribbean island, where he ended up settling and eventually farming sea snails. A decade after Hesse departed from Connecticut in the early 1970s and steered his 28-foot wooden boat to Providenciales, an island in the Turks and Caicos archipelago, he founded the world's only aquacultural facility for conch (pronounced "conk").

Although the snail-like mollusk is better known for its white-and-pink shell than for its flavor, Hesse has convinced a few prominent American restaurants to add conch to their menus. Le Bernardin in Manhattan, Blue

wanted to stop at the Virgin Islands to study the conch. But after she and Hesse altered their route, she saw that the waters of Providenciales teemed with the shellfish, and so they stayed there. "I was her technician," Hesse says, explaining the role he played while Orr pursued her studies. "For two years, I lived with a family of conch in the same way that Jane Goodall lived with chimps. I learned their behavior, their growth rate, and how they ate and slept." After Orr earned her diploma, the couple pursued ecotourism ventures and campaigned to preserve the natural beauty of the Turks and Caicos. She was less excited about Hesse's dream of starting a conch farm, however, and departed Providenciales following their divorce in 1982.

Hesse set up his facility in 1985 and then spent more than 20 years determining how best to nurture the mollusks and prepare them for market. "I didn't know if it was farmable, but I believed in the animal," Hesse says, "and I believed in my ability to solve problems." His farm lies on the eastern tip of the island and consists of 70 acres—10 on land and 60 on water. The farm contains more than 4 million conch at different stages of maturity; most of the year-old animals are moved to offshore pens to grow until they are ready for harvest. When fully grown, conch range in length from 2 inches to more than 6 inches.

Like his livestock, Hesse's business is growing. At press time, he was planning to open Conch World in January on Grand Turk, another island in the Turks and Caicos. Located near a terminal that Carnival Cruises opened in 2006, the 8-acre facility will entertain tourists from the 230 cruise ships that visit annually. In addition to a café that will serve conch ceviche and conch salad, the attraction will contain historic exhibits, such as a re-creation of a 1780s-era village, which would have been inhabited by pro-British Americans (and their slaves) who had settled in the archipelago after the Revolutionary War. "The goal is to show the indigenous history and resources of the region," he says, "and create a self-sustaining business." And also introduce thousands of people to the taste of conch.

—SHEILA GIBSON STOODLEY

*Caicos Conch Farm, 649.946.5643, [www.caicosconchfarm.com](http://www.caicosconchfarm.com);  
Conch World, 649.946.1228, [www.conchworld.com](http://www.conchworld.com)*



Ginger in Wellesley, Mass., and Nobu in Miami Beach, Fla., all serve the firm-textured, mild-tasting seafood, which they purchase from Hesse's Caicos Conch Farm. He sells about 13,000 pieces of conch meat a week.

Hesse sailed from Connecticut in 1973 with his then-wife, Kathy Orr, intending to make the Virgin Islands the first stop on a globe-circling journey. "We left in December, which was stupid. It's cold in December, and we couldn't get east," Hesse says, recalling that the easterly route to the Virgin Islands required him to sail directly into the Caribbean trade winds. After more than a week of battling 25 mph gusts while suffering from seasickness, Hesse accepted Orr's advice and sailed west. "We ended up in the Turks and Caicos," he says, "which neither she nor I knew existed."

To complete work for her master's degree in marine sciences from the University of Connecticut, Orr initially had

*The conch salad offered at Grace Bay Club resort in Turks and Caicos features seafood (and a shell) from Hesse's nearby farm.*