Louisiana alligator, which can rightfully lay claim as "The Meat of Champions," shows signs of becoming another of the state's contributions to the Cajun cooking craze that's sweeping the nation.

Ask the World Champion Chicago Bears, who ordered 250 pounds of alligator meat from a Louisiana shipper for a banquet in the Windy City before coming to this year's Super Bowl in New Orleans. The 46-10 whipping they laid on the New England Patriots for the National Football League title inspired another order of 300-400 pounds to serve at a victory celebration upon returning home.

"It's lean and high in protein," says Dr. Mike Moody, food scientist with the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, whose work in the state's aquaculture industry has attracted research money to study the potential for the alligator as a marketable seafood.

A $5,000 grant given to Moody and Extension by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries last year funded research conducted in cooperation with the LSU Department of Food Science on the Baton Rouge campus. The studies showed that alligator meat performs well after freezing and that it can be canned in various media (water, brine), as well as dry packed, if it is pre-cooked, as is done with tuna.

"It is very easy to remove the fat, which is not marbled through the flesh like some other meats. It separates easily and leaves a meat that is less than two percent fat," Moody adds. "We've adapted it to many recipes. It has the texture of pork and a rather bland taste that Americans are used to in their domesticated meats, such as chicken, beef and pork. It definitely doesn't have a fishy or strong wild game flavor that some people don't like."

Support money Wildlife and Fisheries shared with agencies of the LSU Agricultural Center is part of a systematic and unhurried effort at seeking additional economic benefits of alligators from the state's wetlands and waters. Once hunted only for personal use or discarded as having little or no dollar value. Approximately 30 percent of an alligator's weight is in its meat.

"Louisiana considers the alligator a renewable resource, rather than a sacred cow," says David Richard, biologist with Wildlife and Fisheries' Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge at Grand Chenier, headquarters of research efforts which have brought the reptile back from endangered status over the past 25 years.

"Louisiana moved to protect the alligator as early as 1962. 12 years before passage of the Federal Endangered Species Act. The ban in force over the next 10 years, along with enormous efforts of LDWF biologists, helped restore native populations. From an experimental season in 1972 only in Cameron Parish, seasons and hunting areas for the wild crop gradually have been expanded to include the whole state.

For the 30-day annual season last September, Wildlife and Fisheries authorized 17,000 tags, or one per alligator, to bona fide landowners or trappers who have written agreements with landowners. Due to the value of the animal's hide, which can bring as much as $24 a foot, and its peculiness, the species requires special regulations designated to govern the harvest of surplus alligators, yet equally distribute the kill in relation to population levels. A complex system of applications, licenses, tags and report forms are necessary to manage the program effectively.

The number of tags varies each year with the current status of the alligator population, determined on the basis of aerial censuses of nests and home. The 12 coastal parishes which have 85 percent of Louisiana's alligator habitat.

The present seasonality of the bulk of the alligator harvest was one of the major reasons that Extension and Food Science at the university were asked to investigate ways of processing and preserving the meat for future consumption.

"With a potential of 1 million pounds of meat being harvested during the season, there's no way that amount could be consumed in such a short time," says Moody, who, together with Extension area fisheries agent Paul Coreil, developed the definitive Alligators: Harvesting and Processing handbook that's used throughout the industry today. A handful of commercial alligator farms are now in business within the state, their harvests comprising an estimated 15 percent of the state's annual crop. People starting out are subject to state regulations and must begin from...
hatchlings provided by the LDWF, meaning several years of no income on the investment until the animals grow to marketable size.

“It’s not for everyone. No just anyone can get baby alligators, and it’s very highly regulated,” says Moody. He adds that one of the most costly aspects of the business has to do with strict state health department rules regulating processing plants, including buildings and equipment required to produce safe seafood products.

The LDWF has recently contracted with one USDA-inspected processor for the harvest of 3,500 alligators on Marsh Island off the coast of Vermilion Parish, one reason being a feasibility study of a spring season.

Egon Klein of Baton Rouge, one of the state’s biggest processors and shippers of alligator hides and meat, won the bid for the Marsh Island project and already has processed some 20,000 pounds of the meat, with 1,500 alligators still left to be harvested.

He figures to sell 50,000 to 60,000 pounds of frozen meat this year, mainly to out-of-state wholesalers on both coasts and at points in between, dealing in lots of 5,000 pounds or more.

Klein sees a bright future for alligator meat. “In the next three years, all the meat that is produced in Louisiana will be easily sold. There will be no problem at all selling 500,000 to 600,000 pounds a year,” he predicts.

A native of Hungary, he already has several interested contacts in a half-dozen European countries, including one of the world’s largest international brokers who has expressed interest in adding alligator meat to its list of available items. He says the Japanese also are interested in the meat.

Seafood retailer-shipper George Tucker of Baker says the NFL-champion Bears made one of the larger bulk buys from him over the past year and that through the Chicago restaurateur who handled the deal, he was able to pick up other sales and contacts.

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Tucker says alligator meat is mainly considered a novelty item on restaurant menus now, but that he’s selling more and more from his frozen inventory throughout the year to dealers who want to try it. “It was something we had to fight with crawfish to get it accepted all over,” he concludes.

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