Can It Be Long Before Cajuns Discover Soft-Shelled Crawfish?

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NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The soft-shelled crab, that naked crustacean beloved by coastal gourmets and gourmands, has a new competitor here — the soft-shelled crawfish.

"It's the best product we've come up with since the soft-shelled crab," said Harlon Pearce, general manager of the seafood company which sells them.

But at $9 a pound and only a few bites to a mudbug, they won't be seen at the neighborhood crab feasts where folks down huge plates of boiled crab and fried soft-shelled crab.

"It is definitely a gourmet item. ... It's not a cheap product," said Pearce.

"But Louisianans are definitely a food-oriented people. We feel it has a real place in the marketplace. In New Orleans, in particular."

The "buster," or soft-shelled blue crab, and its crawfish counterpart are both crustaceans, which have grown too big for their britches, burst their shells, and crawled out. Until new shells harden, they are peculiarly vulnerable and edible.

"Soft-shelled crawfish have been around for a long time. But they're hard to catch because the soft-shelled crawfish doesn't feed. It just hides in its hole," said Harlon Pearce of Batstella's Seafood in New Orleans.

That means you can't get soft-shelled crawfish in nets and traps, the traditional ways to get them out of Louisiana's muddy swamplands and rice paddies.

Busters have been grown commercially for decades, and soft-shelled crawfish have long been caught by hand in freshwater streams as fishbait.

And it was as bait, rather than people food, that Louisiana researchers first thought of soft-shelled mudbugs.

"I was probably the first one in the state to try to do any work with those things," said Jay Huner, a crawfish specialist at Southern University in Baton Rouge.

"We were trying to produce soft crawfish, small ones, to be sold for fish bait. There's a very lucrative market in the midwest. But in the process of producing these things, it became very obvious they would be very good to eat, especially the larger ones."

He said a number of researchers worked on the project, but most were out of the bottom. Then they had a net or trawl mounted in front of the boat, so when its moving in the water it would catch the crawfish.”

Blue crabs about to shed can be recognized and segregated into special tanks, where they're checked every two hours. Unshelled crabs are removed, stopping the fresh shells from hardening and shipped alive — in special frames that are one crab deep — wherever they are to be eaten.

Huner said another

Baton Rouge researcher worked out a system of shedding tanks for crawfish and was just about to try to market them when Jim Avault of LSU Fisheries and Dean Cain, then a student at LSU, worked out the "tickler."

"They found was that when they are driving their boat along, any crawfish there was shocked up and they caught them. You realize, of course, that all crawfish don't shed at one time. They have found anywhere from no soft crawfish to up to half the catch soft crawfish," Huner said.

"The student who developed it found in Batstella an unlimited market. I suspect that within the next year, several more will get into it."

At the moment Batstella's is selling the "minibusters" mainly to one French Quarter restaurant which uses 50 to 100 pounds a day, Pearce said. He said a few other restaurants get them once or twice a week, depending on the amount available.

"It's a very minimal volume product right now. We're not trying to sell tons and tons right now."

"We plan to promote it very slowly. We'll slowly acquire, each year, more acreage in ponds. Each year we'll add new ponds to the catching program and build our volume."

"And it's not a product we're just going to give to anyone."