Crawfish contests at trade show won by Texans

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LAFAYETTE — Texans with Cajun roots won two crawfish cooking contests over Louisianians on Friday, the opening day of the Seventh International Crawfish Tasting and Trade Show Exhibition here.

The trade show opens to the public 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday at the Cajundome, exhibiting several food booths and the latest crawfish farming technologies.

In a gumbo cooking contest, Rene Hebert of Alvin, Texas, took top honors with a crawfish and chicken concoction, and native Texan Bill Yeager of Alvin won for best boiled crawfish.

“Almost all of us are originally from Louisiana, but we all live in Texas,” Hebert said. He is a native of Kaplan, and other Texans included Ron Perry of Rayne, Mauriceville, located between Beaumont and Houston, 20 years ago, and is known as Mr. Crawfish in Texas.

Roy is a legend in the Texas crawfish industry, according to his Texas teammates, for a breakthrough he developed in preparing the crustaceans for cooking.

“I started purged crawfish,” Roy said, explaining the method for cleaning the crawfish by sitting them in fresh water for 24 hours to purge the mud from their insides.

“Louisianians have been cuising me for that ever since,” Roy quipped.

Roy said he started crawfishing in Mauriceville, located between Beaumont and Houston, 20 years ago, and is known as Mr. Crawfish in Texas.

Mauriceville hosts an annual crawfish festival and is recognized by the state Legislature as the crawfish capital of Texas, he said.

Not all events Friday were so fun-filled. Crawfishermen attended panel discussions on problems facing their industry, such as the lack of standards in categorizing crawfish sizes.

Defining size categories for crawfish is essential for farmers to know when to take their product to market, they said.

“It’s apparent that we need standardization in grading the crawfish,” said Perry Lavernge, president of the Louisiana Crawfish Farmers Association.

“All the other fishing industries have it, and we should too,” he said, adding that quality standards are needed to earn consumer confidence in the product.

In fact, the crawfish association has a committee looking into setting such standards, Lavernge said.

In other matters, the panel, which included three merchandisers and a LCFA product promoter, said opportunities exist for expanding the industry outside of Louisiana.

Louisiana crawfishermen must tailor their product to the tastes of out-of-staters, including instructions on how to prepare, eat and store crawfish if they want success in new markets, the panelists said.

For instance, Houstonians prefer purged crawfish — those cleansed of mud externally and internally over a day’s time — to those which are only rinsed after being removed from the pond, said Mohammed Jaddy, seafood buyer for the 20 Fiesta Marts in the Houston area.

“Our customers are most interested in live crawfish, and they don’t want to have to clean them,” said Jaddy.

“Crawfish is a party product,” Jaddy said, adding that his customers like the idea of boiling the crustacean more than buying prepacked tails.

Fiesta Mart — the smallest store is 8,000 square feet and the largest 200,000 — doubled its sales of crawfish in 1989 to 600,000 pounds, Jaddy said, in part because of holding several promotional boils on store parking lots.

Jeddy and Bill Babin, seafood and meat merchandiser for Winn-Dixie’s New Orleans region, said quality is key for consumers looking to buy crawfish.

“Price has taken a back seat to quality as the consumers’ first concern,” Babin said.

Crawfish has a unique image problem in some parts of the country, where it is used only as fish bait, said Rodd Sidney, a San Diego marketing consultant who merchandises smoked crawfish for a California fish company.

“Maybe you should think of calling it a Cajun lobster. When you take the tail and dip it in butter, it tastes awfully close to lobster.”

Samplings, such as at Jaddy’s Fiesta stores, are the key to expanding crawfish markets, Sidney said.

Mary Anne Burke, a member of the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board, said the board targets major cities in the U.S. with sampling presentations, which include cooking, eating and storage tips.

“We’re concentrating on the white table cloth restaurants, hoping for a trickle-down effect,” Burke said.

“When people think of Louisiana, they think of Cajun. And when they think of Cajun, the first thing they think of is crawfish,” Burke said.

She said Louisiana has the largest crawfish industry in the nation, with 65 million pounds produced in 1989.