Canning gator meat having hidden side effects

By Dixie Simon
Staff Writer

Jack Montoucet is in the midst of a steamy seven-year love affair with the most unlikely of animal species—the American swamp alligator.

Witness as the laid-back country gentleman discourses on its history over an early morning cup of Cajun coffee at his home in Scott.

“I think the alligator and its survival as a Louisiana industry is truly a successful ‘Cinderella’ story,” begins Montoucet, adding he thinks it’s also a tale gone under-publicized and unappreciated by most of us.

“It’s said in the 1700-1800’s alligators were so plentiful you could walk across Louisiana rivers on their backs, yet no one ever hunted them. I don’t know by 1954 they’d been exploited to the point of extinction and placed on the endangered list. It’s said alligators are found in all 50 states and only 3 states do not have alligators in them.

When Montoucet’s courtship with the gator began in 1966 with the death of his wife, it was a wild ride for a 20-year fire service career, he retired as Lafayette’s fire chief.

Too young at 38 for an idle life, he went searching for something less stressful (and non-political) to get involved in. He naturally turned to the production and marketing of caviar.

“Originally, I wanted to raise Red Fish, but the state offered little information on hatchings,” Montoucet remembers, so he attended an LSU alligators and fishing seminar and got hooked on that idea instead.

Hunting wild gators for their skins had been poor success, but Montoucet, who says tourists can’t seem to get enough of the stuff, decided to farm the reptiles for their hides.

Since last year, Montoucet’s own pen, which houses up to 2,000 thrashing, snapping critters, stand dark and empty.

In an effort to save his investment, Montoucet cast his net for a new idea and came up with—tourism industry.

“I thought, every other commodity can be bought in a can. Why not alligator meat?” he says.

Calling his new company Jacques’s Gourmet Gator, Montoucet started buying fresh gator meat in bulk from local farmers and processors, then processing the meat into frozen steaks for the restaurant trade, and into caviar for supermarkets.

It started appearing on local market shelves in July, wearing a champagne pocketbook price tag of about $4 for 3.5 ounces of the smoked variety and $3 for plain.

“We also process the heads and feet here, we don’t waste anything,” notes Montoucet, who says tourists can’t wait to cart home the toothy trophies to show off to their friends.

His best customer for gator foot necklaces and key chains, he adds, is a Native American gift shop owner in New Hampshire.

Once embarked on, Montoucet’s canned gator business only got better.

On a jaunt to Hong Kong for a leather show in 1991, he stopped over in Taiwan and spotted whole carcass alligator meat selling in open-air markets.

“I was amazed,” he says, “the round-about way, he says it forced him to re-think his marketing perspective. To move more of his product, he’d have to think differently than an American in America.”

With much of the world having limited or no refrigeration, Montoucet says his high protein, low fat and cholesterol canned meat source is especially well suited for international sales.

That fact has been played out at U.S. food trade shows where he says food buyers from this country and all over the world consistently display a display table waiting to taste-test canned gator meat.

“But I don’t want to create a demand I can’t supply,” he explains, adding, “You can shoot yourself in the leg. It’s not that we can’t sell the product, but we don’t want to have too many buyers before we can get the product to them.”

Alligator