Going after the middle money

C.J. LeBlanc with his live boxes

More work, more investment, but more customers

C.J. LeBlanc is a St. Martin Parish crawfish farmer. Like farmers of all kinds, he has been thinking for a long time about how he can eliminate the middle man. If he could market his own product, he's figured, he could cash in on those extra dollars in the middle.

LeBlanc may just have found a way to do it. He's taken on a considerable amount of extra work, and made a considerable investment in the technology of "live boxes."

But he says his customer pool is growing so fast, he can see the day coming when he'll have to buy extra crawfish from other farmers and fishermen to supply the demand.

"I feel I'm going to get my investment back," says LeBlanc. "I've had a lot of new customers. It's looking good, and I'm real excited about it."

LeBlanc started crawfishing 14 years ago on a part-time basis. He was fishing someone else's pond, giving the landowner a third of his catch. In 1975 he took up the business full time, and began developing 30 acres of crawfish ponds of his own, on family property near Breaux Bridge Senior High School.

Two years ago, when LeBlanc and three other crawfish farmers visited Texas to see a crawfish harvesting machine called a Mudbug, LeBlanc saw his first live boxes.

It was a little later when LeBlanc felt he could afford the investment in a Mudbug (which only last week enabled him to harvest and rebait 1000 traps in four hours), and in the materials for the live boxes.

A live box is a sort of crib, about the same size as a baby's crib. The bottom is wood and the sides are metal mesh. The crawfish are harvested out of the ponds, sorted, and placed in the live boxes. The boxes, by a system of pulleys, are lowered into the water, then raised when the crawfish are to be sold.

The system also involves a pump to circulate and add oxygen to the water, to keep the crawfish alive in the boxes. LeBlanc hopes to add aerators as well, as he can afford them. But with the present system he has kept crawfish in the boxes for up to three weeks.

But usually they stay only a few days.

"Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, live crawfish don't move. The restaurants are closed on Mondays, and nobody wants to boil crawfish during the week," explains LeBlanc. "With the live boxes, I can catch crawfish on Monday and have them ready for the
The stay in the boxes also allows the crawfish to purge themselves. They are not feeding while in the boxes and so naturally get rid of the mud and dirt inside. Not only that, any bait, trash, or dead crawfish are sorted out in moving the crawfish from the pond to the live boxes, and from the boxes to the sacks.

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LeBlanc's primary clientele is made up of area individuals. He has but a single regular restaurant customer, as well as a few others on an irregular basis.

LeBlanc says the individuals see the advantage of his purged and sorted crawfish, and are willing to pay the extra price. The restaurants are, by and large, not as willing, though LeBlanc hopes to win them over in time.

Selling his catch directly to customers means more work for LeBlanc. "You've got to put them in the boxes, and then when a customer comes, instead of pulling a sack out of the cooler, you've got to scoop them out of the boxes, sort out any dead ones, and bag them," he says. "It's a lot more work."

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By that time they’re not only running in the ponds but in the basin, too. This year’s high water and mild winter make forecasters predict a bumper crop from the basin.

For all its problems, crawfish farming has become increasingly popular. This year they are about 90,000 acres of crawfish farms in the state, up about 50 percent from last year, according to St. Martin county agent Alfred Guidry. One reason for the jump is that rice farmers, hard-pressed by low prices for their product, have turned to crawfishing for a second crop.

That more and more people are taking on the risks and making the investment necessary for crawfish farming can only be good news for those of us who love to dine on the tasty crustacean. One thing the crawfish business does not lack: a ready and growing market.

—ROGERS OLVERSON