The shortage of domestic processed crawfish tail meat was nothing short of a crisis last season. The result was limited access to, and higher prices for, packaged crawfish. Most local restaurateurs, grocers, wholesalers and processors felt the pinch. Dr. Jay Huner, director of the UL Lafayette Crawfish Research Center, even called domestic output of the last few seasons "the worst I've ever seen."

In a July *Times* article detailing the problem, several players in the local crawfish industry agonized about the quandary. "A lot of people are going Chinese, but I've never used a pound of Chinese meat since 1972," said Bill Pizzolato of Tony's Seafood of Baton Rouge. "We're making a decision on what we're going to do. Are you going to be out of meat, or do you go to another market?"

Apparently, you go to another market. Pizzolato, no fan their ruthless Chinese because of that nation's ruthless pricing tactics, thinks that Spain may be the solution. "The (crawfish) plants are excellent, state of the art," he says. "They're very professional and very clean. I think in time, it could be a viable alternative."

Using Spanish meat will lessen Louisiana's dependence on Chinese imports. "Of course, it will soften demand for Chinese meat," says Frank Randol of Randol's Restaurant.

But it remains to be seen whether locals will take to Spanish crawfish more readily than Chinese. "Right now, there's still not general acceptance of Chinese meat in the stores. It's all in the perception," says Randol. "Are they not buying because it's Chinese, or are they not buying because it's not Louisiana?"

Spain's crawfish industry is emerging from a two-decade slump to become a player in the world market. "In the early '70s, after most of their native crawfish had been decimated by pollution and disease," Louisiana crawfish were taken to Spain to repopulate, says Huner. Crawfish now thrive in Spanish rice fields.

Pizzolato, now waiting for Spanish crawfish to clear customs so he can sample them for texture and quality, says that although a good domestic season is being predicted, those in the industry know nothing's a given. "My heart is in Louisiana," says Pizzolato. "If I can get (crawfish) here, even if I have to pay more, I'll get Louisiana tails. But ... Spain would just be another backup if our crop is depleted."

— CHARLIE BIER