Softshell crawfish tasty new product

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Anybody who's been in Cajun country for more than two days knows that there's little better eating than a platterful of steaming, spicy crawfish just out of the boiling pot. But producers throughout south Louisiana think they may have found something even better: softshell crawfish, dipped in batter, deep fried and eaten shell and all.

Just like a crab, an immature crawfish sheds its shell to grow, and soft shell producers wait for the moment when each shucks his hard shell and, for a few hours, becomes a "butter soft" delicacy. The trick is to keep a constant eye on the crustaceans and quick-freeze them at just the right time. Within six to twelve hours the shell begins to harden again.

Softshell crawfish production is a new and growing industry in Acadiana. It began in south Louisiana less than five years ago, but is growing rapidly as an alternative and supplement for dealers who have traditionally been producing softshell crabs for the Louisiana market and elsewhere. The first producer was Jimmy Daigle of Napoleonville. During the 1985-1986 season, seven producers raised about 6,000 pounds. Dudley Culley, an LSU fisheries professor says that in 1989, some 250 producers from Texas to the Carolinas will raise some 200,000 pounds.

The idea is to control things to simulate the murky ponds and ditches that crawfish call home. Softshell production is also labor intensive. The Trappeys have trapping rights to swamplands near Donaldsonville, where they maintain some 1,000 traps. Each of the crawfish they catch must be inspected to see if it is a candidate for the molting trays.

Mature crawfish rarely shed, for example, so they're set aside to be purged, then sold to local restaurants or dealers for traditional uses. The immature ones that are likely to molt are moved to holding trays, where they are examined regularly for signs of shedding their shells.

When they are ready to molt, the crawfish are moved to separate trays, because crawfish find their brethren as much a delicacy as do people. A crawfish without the protection of his hard shell lasts about thirty seconds in a tray alongside his hungry, hard-shelled brothers.

The Trappeys, just now entering their second year of operation, maintain sixty three-foot-by-eight-foot molting trays at their indoor crawfish "farm" on Fairlane Dr., alongside Northpark in north Lafayette. They harvest fifty to sixty dozen softshell mudbugs each week, selling them primarily to local restaurants. During crab season, generally from March to November, they'll also harvest some 1,500 softshell crabs each day for sale to eateries and dealers, he says.

The operation has been successful enough that the Trappeys have just acquired a second location, dockside at Baldwin, in St. Mary Parish, which they intend to use primarily for softshell crab production, while devoting the Lafayette facility mostly to crawfish.

"It's really a fascinating process," Trappey says, "and as more people began to find out about softshell crawfish and how to prepare them, it's going to grow."

He says his company has been dealing primarily with the local market, and that there is a growing demand among restaurateurs for the delicacy. With an increase in production with the opening of the second plant in March he will begin investigating a other markets, both in Louisiana and out-of-state.

At least one Louisiana producer, Handy Softshell Crawfish in Baton Rouge, is promoting softshell crawfish internationally, with a tour of the Scandinavian countries, where traditional crawfish dishes have been introduced and are popular, and the Trappeys and other producers see the softshell market growing in step with the nationwide fascination with Cajun cuisine.
is to control light, water temperature and chemical balance so that the crawfish thinks it is a rainy day in the springtime. That's when they molt most.

Early on there was a lot of trial and error in the process, he says, and, to some degree, there still is. Producers had to experiment, for example, to learn that crawfish don't like light and that the water circulating through their holding trays needs a high oxygen content.