Crawfish Farming

By Dunstan Prial
Staff Writer

When E. J. Cormier was growing up 40 years ago on a dairy farm south of Crowley, catching crawfish was a family affair. The whole clan might take a homemade trap and go out into the rice fields to catch enough for a boil that night. "It was a nice family outing," said Cormier, 52.

Crawfishing is still a family affair for Cormier, but it's taken on a different meaning. Cormier is one of many area farmers who raise crawfish as a commercial crop.

"It's big business now," he said. "Twenty years ago people sold crawfish on the side of the road outside Morgan City for $3 a sack. It's only been in the last 10 years or so that it's become an industry." 

In the mid-1980s, Cormier rearranged his 140 acres of farmland into rice fields. He built levees, put in a drainage system, and bought a $10,000 pump to flood his fields. He runs crawfish as a commercial crop because rice prices haven't risen in years and crawfish farming makes very few people rich.

"You might make it with rice and crawfish," he said, "if you can get a decent price for both. But that's not easy." 

Cormier's two sons, Craig and Curtis, help out on the farm. Both said it took time to adjust to the physical demands of crawfish farming.

"When you first start, your arm wants to fall off," said Curtis Cormier.

Craig Cormier explained that the family owns about 1,000 traps. The traps are placed about 40 feet apart in rows in the crawfish ponds, which are filled with water that drops in late spring when supplies drop in late spring when supplies.

The traps are pulled from the water, and the crawfish are emptied into a grader that separates the smaller crawfish from the larger ones. The large ones go into a sack and make up the day's catch. The smaller ones go back into the pond.

The empty trap goes back into the water at the spot where the next trap is lifted out of the pond. The Cormiers said they only run the traps about three times a week to give the crawfish time to grow.

"The little ones that go back in that's tomorrow's crawfish," said Curtis Cormier. "They're just going to be a little bigger." 

Most people don't know it, but the biggest and most profitable market for crawfish is in Sweden, where the crustaceans are considered a delicacy.

Craig Cormier lifts up a trap of crawfish while working his ponds south of Crowley.

Crawfish raised in Acadia are packaged and frozen in the United States then flown or shipped to Sweden. But unlike Cajuns, who prefer their crawfish in a spicy dish, the Swedes enjoy theirs pickled in dill juice.

E. J. Cormier knew a little about crawfish farming before he got into the business. Now he and his sons know "as much as anyone can know about them," he said.

The industry is still very new, he said, so trial and error among commercial crawfish farmers is common. "Every Cajun has his own way of doing it," he said.

The crawfish cycle works as follows:

1. The Big Business Of
By Dunstan Prial

2. What Kind Of Crawfish?
By Jonas Breaux

3. Staff Writer

If it looks like a crawfish, crawls like a crawfish, pinches like a crawfish — then it's a crawfish... but what kind: deep water or pond-raised? And if the crawfish taste — oh so delicious, when seasoned and boiled to perfection — even diehard crawfish eaters can't tell whether the crawfish they are enjoying are pond-raised or caught in the wild.

Then what's all the hype about Atchafalaya Basin versus pond-raised crawfish?

Roy Robin of Bayouland Seafood in Cecilia, a crawfish processor and producer, has been handling crawfish for more than 20 years. He says the only real way to tell the difference between crawfish that are wild versus pond-raised is to ask the fisherman who caught the crustaceans.

"I don't really think there is a difference," Robin said. "Crawfish is crawfish."

There are two types of crawfish common to Louisiana, the Red Swamp and White River crawfish. And like the names suggest, it is very easy to tell them apart.

The White River is the type most people eat, whether from ponds or the Basin. If you are eating boiled crawfish in a restaurant and it's light red and has off-colored or green fat, then it's a good bet you are eating a White River crawfish.

Red Swamp crawfish are dark red when boiled, and the fat is yellow to golden in color.

There are other ways to tell if you are eating pond-raised or Basin crawfish because the season for the two overlaps only during late spring and early summer.

Basin crawfish are harvested when the Atchafalaya River rises in the spring, forcing water into what fishermen refer to as "back water areas."

The Basin season generally runs from mid-March to mid-July, depending on how early the river rises or how long it remains high.

Pond fishermen begin flooding their ponds in September, with some fishing until April, when they switch from crawfish to rice production; others may fish as late as mid-June.

Like any other market-driven industry, crawfish prices start high in the fall when supply does not meet demand. Crawfish prices generally level out after the first of the year and drop in late spring when supplies often exceed local demand.

Some people think deep water (Basin) crawfish are bigger, but I've sold pond crawfish that were as big as any Basin crawfish," said Azelle "Lee" Breaux, of Breaux's Seafood in Leroy.

Breaux grew up in Bell River, well-known for the top quality Basin crawfish brought into area processing plants.

"I grew up eating Basin crawfish and I've been dealing pond crawfish for several years now, and I can't say there's any difference other than some are White River," Breaux said. "I think pond crawfish taste as good, if not better than deep water." 

Robin, who deals with both pond and Basin fishermen, agrees with Breaux about the taste of crawfish.

"I don't get me wrong — both Basin and pond crawfish taste the same to me, if they were caught in an area where the water quality is good and there is plenty of food," Robin said. "Personally, I prefer the pond crawfish because you can't beat the taste. The fat is richer and sweeter, to me."

Robin and Breaux both agree that if you were to blindfold them and get them to sample quality crawfish from the Basin and ponds, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference.

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