Bill Pizzolato, left, and John Woodfield, both of Tony's Seafood, pour freshly boiled crawfish out of the boiling basket onto a table for bagging. On a typical weekend during Lent, Tony's Seafood will boil as much as 32,000 pounds of live crawfish a day.

Bill Pizzolato is a man who loves crawfish. He's also a Louisianian who thinks of crawfish as a precious resource. . . part and parcel to a culture and way of life. Watch him in operation on a busy Friday morning during Lent at his family's seafood market and business on Plank Road, where he oversees the boiling of as much as 32,000 pounds of live crawfish on a single day. From checking the truck coming in to unload 16,000 pounds of crawfish sacks that have been bought at seafood docks across South Louisiana to helping fill an order of hot crawfish right out of the truck, Pizzolato is obviously in a job he enjoys. It shows in his smile, bright eyes and friendly demeanor.

To protect his interest in good, Louisiana-style crawfish, Pizzolato said, the family business, Tony's Seafood, had to adjust to a change in the marketing of crawfish about five years ago. At that time, processors started sending many of Louisiana's large crawfish out of state.

To have access to traditional, mixed-size crawfish from medium to large, Tony's Seafood purchased four refrigerated trucks that started going directly to the docks to buy ungraded crawfish. Tony's also expanded its processing plant on Plank Road in Baton Rouge.

Tony's trucks make buys seven days a week. When they return to the loading dock in Baton Rouge, the crawfish are unloaded and moved to a chilling room.

Every sack of crawfish is tagged with an identification card listing the name of the fisherman as a result when the crawfish were purchased. When a sack of crawfish is opened, if the crawfish are too small, the fisherman is put on notice that his crawfish are an unacceptable size. The small crawfish are sent to a sorter. The crawfisherman is given another chance to improve his harvest, but if the crawfish remain small, Tony's buyers go to other crawfishermen.

Tony's personnel wash, rinse, sort, discard and rinse all of the crawfish sold through Tony's Seafood. After the final rinse, the crawfish are purged in salt for 15 minutes.

After draining, the crawfish are lowered into gigantic vats of boiling water. From 400 to 500 pounds of crawfish are boiled at a time. After boiling, the crawfish are moved to a lower temperature seasoning soak for 20 minutes.

The steaming hot crawfish are poured into bins to cool down before being rolled out to the sales counter. "One warning I want to give consumers," Pizzolato said, "is how to tell crawfish are fresh. One problem customers have with spoilage is when they buy a sack of live crawfish and take them home to boil the next day. Often a customer will pour the crawfish into a wash tub and fill it with water. He leaves it overnight. The next day he goes out to get ready for the crawfish boil, and the crawfish are all drowned. Crawfish need to stay moist, their gills damp, but they can't live when submerged in water.

Tony's Seafood concentrates on its local customers, but it does ship some crawfish out of state. "We really didn't want to get into shipping," Pizzolato confided, "but a few years ago when the economy got so bad, and people were leaving the state to find jobs, we got pleading phone calls asking us to send crawfish to homesick customers. So we started doing a few.

Now, Tony's ships about 15 packages a week on UPS and another 20 packages by air. The UPS orders are less than 20 pounds each, and the air packages are about 70 pounds each. One weekly order for 500 to 600 pounds goes to a customer in Florida. They shipped 18,000 pounds to Jacksonville, Fla., two weeks ago for a seafood festival.

In Tommy's Tips on the FOOD cover, Pizzolato tells consumers how to tell if crawfish are fresh. Another way, he says, is to feel the crawfish. If they are sticky and slimy, they are spoiled.