

Fishing for Exports? Try Surimi in France

By Marie-Cécile Henard

Surimi, meaning “washed fish,” first appeared four centuries ago in Japan. The recipe was simple enough: fish fillets were crumbled, rinsed in fresh water, salted and shaped into little cakes that were steam-cooked.

Most U.S. consumers know the descendant of Japan’s original surimi as imitation crab meat made of whitefish.

Dieters and other consumers in the United States and France alike know surimi is a good source of protein, minerals and vitamins. It is recognized as a healthy food product that is low in fat. This *faux* fish may never be considered *haute cuisine*, but many find it more satisfying than conventional diet fare. French consumers, now more health-conscious than ever, are increasingly making surimi a part of their meals—and they import a lot of it from the United States. In the last 10 years, surimi consumption in France has tripled, overtaking sales of smoked salmon.

Factors Favoring Surimi

Beyond its healthy aspects, surimi appeals because it is a snack that is as easy to carry and store as it is healthy.

This convenience is a big help to busy two-income French families. Four out of 10 households consume surimi. Households with three to five people—typically families with children—are the greatest consumers. The average surimi consumer often has a lower-middle income.

In the first 10 months of fiscal 2001, the United States exported more than 8 million metric tons of surimi—that’s the



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**IT'S NO FISH STORY—
IT'S A FACT. IN INCREASINGLY
HEALTH-CONSCIOUS FRANCE,
SURIMI SELLS!**

highest level since at least the 1970s. It’s also a 167-percent increase over exports for the same time period in 2000. Incidentally, the United States supplied 46 percent of France’s total surimi imports in 2000. Most of it was purchased by households as opposed to restaurants or hotels.

French consumers buy mainly fresh surimi products. In 1999, sales of frozen surimi items were 1,555 tons, valued at \$5.6 million. Much of that surimi was made in

a decidedly non-dietary fashion to make meals fast and snacks speedy. In fact, a quarter of France’s surimi buyers surveyed said they use it as a between-meal snack.

Another factor is favoring U.S. sales. French producers cannot seem to meet demand, even though they produce almost 20,000 tons a year. It’s easy to see why: it takes 4 to 5 kilograms of fish to produce 1 kilogram of surimi.

Yummy, Fun Surimi for Kids

It’s important for U.S. exporters to remember that surimi in France serves two purposes: a diet food and a fun, flavorful snack for children.

Surimi sticks have the biggest sales, amounting to 10,550 tons in 1999, up 23.5 percent in one year. Sales of innovative products such as mini-sticks went up 29.3 percent. They are particularly popular in households with children.

THE U.S. SUPPLIED ALMOST HALF OF FRANCE'S SURIMI IMPORTS IN 2000, AND COULD SELL MORE WITH A LITTLE CULINARY CREATIVITY.

Sticks are sold in transparent plastic bags or day-packs (soft plastic packs that stand on a rigid base). They include dipping condiments such as mayonnaise, ketchup, and Tex-Mex and cocktail sauces.

Taking Surimi Somewhere New

French consumers are pragmatic, so naturally they appreciate surimi's value with the younger generation. But don't forget that this is also the country that has set the standard for cutting-edge culinary excellence for generations. Some French chefs plan on teaching surimi a new trick or two. They will probably need a reliable supplier—and it might as well be the United States.

For example, surimi for the French market now comes in several flavors, such as crab, lobster and scallop. The 2000 *Salon International de l'Alimentation* (SIAL) trade show in Paris saw the debut of *kamaboko*, a

steam-cooked, shrimp-flavored product. There is a great deal of research going on in the use of natural flavors to make surimi something special.

The company Activ International has created a range of natural concentrates from crab, lobster, shrimp, scallops, crawfish and salmon to improve surimi flavors.

Food retailer Cuisimer has responded to demand by creating party appetizers called "sticks of the sea." The product consists of three joined surimi sticks that make a three-pointed star when sliced.

Fleury Michon, another French company, has come out with innovative products such as "*les petits bouchons de surimi panés*" and "*fingers de surimi panés*," breaded surimi pieces sold in servings of 7.5 ounces with a little cup of ketchup. These snacks are generally placed next to more conventional breaded fish items in supermarkets.

Fleury Michon also sells cubes of surimi in 5.3-ounce bags, allowing the pieces to remain perfectly shaped in salads and other preparations. To replace tuna in salads, the company sells crumbed pieces in servings of 3.57 ounces that may also include real crab.

Another company in the French market, Meralim, has created a new line of surimi products: imitation crab claws, shaped products with lobster flavor and gambas (also known as Mediterranean prawns). ■

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