

In Canada, U.S. Catfish Sales Are Jumping

By Joel Chetrick

Canadians are catching on to U.S. farm-raised catfish, a relatively new-to-market fish north of the border.

Market development efforts of The Catfish Institute (TCI), a participant in USDA's Market Access Program (MAP), and enterprising U.S. catfish processors have helped build sales in Ontario's retail and food service sectors. With MAP support, TCI began promoting catfish fillets in Canada in 1999, developing a new market for this popular fish from the South.

Following a broad-based marketing strategy, TCI undertook a variety of activities, including market research, in-store promotions with product sampling, culinary school demonstrations, restaurant promotions and trade show participation. TCI also worked with journalists to generate articles about the high quality and versatility of U.S. farm-raised catfish.

Assessing a Future Fish Market

In 2001, U.S. exports of catfish fillets to Canada (as reported by processors) totaled 228 metric tons valued at \$1.4 million, up from 2000 exports of 202 tons valued at \$1.3 million. Export value increased by just 7.7 percent in 2001, as overall catfish prices were suppressed by increased product availability in North America. However, actual sales to Canada are likely higher than the figures indicate, since some catfish products are shipped to Canada labeled as non-specified fish.

In conjunction with TCI marketing activities, FAS staff recently visited several supermarkets in Ontario and met with



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—KEN BERGER,
TCI REPRESENTATIVE IN CANADA

buyers of major Canadian retail chains to assess the market situation for catfish. Retailers were very positive about the outlook for U.S. farm-raised catfish and forecast increasing sales for 2002 and beyond.

Just One Taste . . .

A major challenge facing exporters is getting people to try U.S. farm-raised catfish. Product demonstrators at retail promotions reported that once Canadian

consumers try U.S. farm-raised catfish, they like it.

In addition, retail sales data indicate that when shoppers sample the fish and learn about its health benefits, they buy it. While the data show sharply higher sales during promotions, sales following promotions have also increased over previous non-promotion periods—evidence of sustained sales growth.

A major Canadian retailer reported that its 13 Ontario stores sold 381 pounds of catfish during its first TCI-sponsored in-store promotion, in mid-March 2000. Nearly a year later, in February 2001, the stores sold 586 pounds during a week-long promotion. A February 2002 promotion generated sales of 1,109 pounds—a gain of 191 percent from the first promotion. The chain's seafood buyer also reported that following its first activities with TCI, store sales soared by 400 percent during non-promotion weeks.

In addition to retail promotions, TCI has conducted activities targeting decision



makers in Canada's hotel, restaurant and institutional trade. TCI has worked with culinary schools to educate student chefs about U.S. farm-raised catfish. Cooking seminars and contests have generated new users among future chefs and consumers, and raised the profile of the fish in the food service industry.

In January 2002, Toronto's George Brown College Chefs School and TCI teamed up for their second annual cookoff, where finalists competed against the clock and each other to create new appetizers, soups and entrées with U.S. farm-raised catfish. The finalists prepared a three-course meal of original dishes for guests and a panel of well-known industry experts that judged the competition. The first-place winner, Seungwoo Seo, created an Oriental-style catfish consommé, a Cajun-style catfish

satay (a fish kabob dish) and a poached catfish fillet.

"The competition was fun as well as educational for our culinary students," said Roger Romberg of the Chefs School. "We're very impressed with the high caliber of dishes and look forward to more competitions like it!"

In 2002, TCI is continuing its activities to reach consumers, as well as retail and food service trade. In addition, TCI is planning new retail activities for western provinces to expand sales throughout Canada. Ken Berger, TCI's Canada representative, has high hopes for increased sales of U.S. farm-raised catfish.

"It's exciting to be associated with a product that's generating interest in every sector of the food industry," said Berger. "We can see positive results reflected in

culinary school cookoff competitions and instruction, customer satisfaction at Ontario's restaurants and extensive coverage on the radio and television and in print media. Our retailer education, customer sampling and flyer ads are also netting big rewards for the industry." ■

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