

VALUE-ADDED SEAFOODS

South Floridian seafood consumers have become accustomed to seafood dishes prepared with a dozen or more chef-driven ingredients, and mouth-watering flavours. However, the recession in the early 1990's has reduced disposable income available for eating out, and as a result people are eating less at restaurants, but still crave great tasting seafood dishes. Enter the convenience of value-added seafood which comes ready to fry, sauté, bake or steam in minutes; as seen in prominence at the Boston International Seafood Show, and Seafare of the Americas in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Pre-portioned servings, and marinated fillets have helped South Florida consumers compensate for lost time and money. In addition, financial and economic difficulties have faced the retail and foodservice sectors of the South Florida economy, hence owners and managers have been forced to cut costs while compensating for a general reduction in the number of employees. The obvious trend for retail and foodservice is value-added seafood, as it provides expertly prepared fillets and steaks, breaded calamari rings and oysters, marinated or sauced, and ready to grill, bake, fry, or mix in a fresh salad.

The South Florida market for value-added food products is extremely competitive and increasingly more price conscious. Each calendar year, approximately 12,000 new food products are introduced into the U.S. market, but only a small portion survive on South Florida shelves any length of time. Frozen seafood patties, known as "seafood burgers", with ingredients including salmon, tuna, catfish and surimi, are very popular with some South Florida consumers. Seafood burgers are purchased by quality-oriented cruise lines, restaurant chains, institutions, wholesale food distributors, and retail grocers. Another popular value-added seafood item to hit the South Florida market is the seafood dinner kit, sold largely to restaurant establishments. Varieties of dinner kits include: salmon teriyaki; Chilean sea bass Vera Cruz, with lime, red pepper and vegetables; Mahi-Mahi marinated with teriyaki; and Sake Kasu, a sea bass fillet in a Japanese marinade.

Firms package cultivated black tiger or white shrimp in a stir fry with oil, pea pods, bamboo shoots and carrots, plus a seasoning packet; or lemon pepper shrimp and sweet and sour shrimp with pineapple, bell peppers and onions. A very successful foreign supplier to the U.S. market offers six prepared-seafood entrées for retailers, cruise lines, restaurant chains and food clubs, including Cod Monterey, an 8 oz. cod portion with puff pastry, cheddar cheese and vegetables; Gulf Snapper Imperial with breadcrumbs, cheese, shrimp and crab; Shrimp Galaxy; Sole Supreme, a sole fillet rolled and stuffed with shrimp filling; Salmon Florentine; and Oreo Dory Florentine, with spinach, jack and parmesan cheeses and shrimp. Catfish has become increasingly popular with South Florida consumers prompting the emergence of new products such as catfish fillets in eye-opening Caribbean-style and Mexican marinades. The new catfish is offered in a variety of seasonings, breadings and packaging targeted at consumers, including a growing array of grill-ready marinated products. Value-added catfish products are currently big sellers to major retailers, chain restaurants, foodservice, and distributors.

Value-added seafood products have emerged which exemplify both the national popularity of Asian and Mexican dishes and the national reluctance to spend time in the kitchen. Some value-added seafood products recently introduced to the market include surimi products, such as seafood spring rolls with surimi and cream cheese. Many of these products are appropriately packaged for retail and foodservice, frozen and ready to fry or steam. These types of value-added seafood are not just appetizers, but provide interesting and novel additions to salads, used as side dishes, or teamed with rice for entrées. Caterers, hospitals, restaurants and bars all use these products, and demand appears to be increasing rapidly. Another company is manufacturing meal kits with fresh frozen pasta, prepared sauce, and marinated shrimp in Entrée and Alfredo flavours. The pasta is ready to boil, and the shrimp ready to sauté. The same company has also developed a breaded minced shrimp product, ready to bake or fry, which has become very popular with bars, schools, hospitals.

Salmon is growing in reputation as a value-added seafood product in the South Florida market. Salmon products are offered in many varieties, such as vac-pacs with brown sugar glaze; peppered with black peppercorns; cajun spiced; and dill. The fully-cooked, boned and ready-to-eat portions are priced "each piece", which is an easier sell than "per-pound" pricing. Each unit is UPC coded and has a hole for pegging the package, allowing more display flexibility. Value-added fish and seafood products have a large growth potential in the South Florida market, as consumers seek top-quality entrées, at a reasonable price, with little preparation required. Potential sectors for value-added products in South Florida include foodservice, retail, institutions, restaurants, schools, wholesalers and distributors.