

The Outlook For Breaded Shrimp And Similar Products

MAX MEYER, *President, Meyer Fish and Produce Company, Jacksonville, Fla.*

IN VIEW OF THE CHAOTIC CONDITIONS under which all business is at present operating, we find it easier to talk about the limitations imposed on our work rather than generalize on the broad outlook. If these problems can be solved to the point where they help production, create a better package, lower the sales resistance, and remove objections raised against the product by the consumer and distributor, then we have automatically broadened the sales far beyond anything done so far. Most of these problems are inherent in all frozen foods but breaded shrimp has added a few of its own.

Breaded shrimp processing, to a degree, can be likened to the citrus concentrate industry. Breaded shrimp has been a definitely stabilizing factor in all shrimp producing areas since it has firmed prices on most of the smaller sizes of shrimp ranging from a 35 to 50 count. However, just as there have been repercussions from running the price of fresh oranges from 75c per field crate up to \$3.00 and then having to meet a price on processed juice based on 75c fruit, so we are about to run into that same condition in breaded shrimp. When the product first came out on the market three years ago the size shrimp used in processing was bought for 28c to 32c per pound. Since then it has gone to about 42c, and the price of the finished product has been lowered considerably. Sales have not reached a saturation point as yet but at the present rate of growth in increased facilities of old plants, and with new ones about to open up, we anticipate a real competitive market no later than next spring if business in general does not operate under present conditions.

To begin with, the preparation of breaded shrimp in a number of plants has hurt this infant industry. Few plants grade to any particular size in the range of 35 to 50 count in the consumer 10 or 12 ounce size package. A 50 count shrimp cooks much faster than a 35 count and when these mixed sizes are put in one package some shrimp are over-cooked and others under-done. The industry suffers from a lack of minimum standards, and a lot of bad product has been offered to the public. The Department of Agriculture has been careful to initiate reforms for the protection of the consumer and the producer of citrus concentrate and we certainly need some standards in our work or they will either be forced on us or the item will suffer. The excessive amount of breading indiscriminately used by some processors has brought the industry to the point where it stands accused of manufacturing a rabbit sausage made up in equal proportions of one rabbit to one horse. Some plants also use an egg wash to insure plenty of breading adhering to the shrimp. This egg wash is prepared out of frozen eggs that are thawed and then refrozen in the breaded shrimp resulting in an interesting bacteria count. The next step of packaging has kept pace with most of the frozen food work being done on other times but there is room for lots of improvements. We have no sources for research in packaging, so we have to accept what the package trade offers us and to date very little information has been available on what has been done for breaded shrimp. Now that packaging material has practically gone to war there is still less promise of research. For our part we have refused to store breaded shrimp over the country in order to insure our trade with a supply of fresh merchandise. The present packaging materials available are not much protection against excessive dehydration over a period longer than four months storage.

The freezing facilities now in use leave much to be desired. Few plants operate with temperatures running lower than 15 to 20 degrees below zero. A number of them freeze the smaller packages after they are first insulated against a quick freezing job by packing the individual units inside the master container. Since the smaller packages are invariably abused by the store trade in re-handling, the ultimate consumer gets merchandise that is far from desirable. Here again self-imposed or federal freezing standards will protect the consumer and good packer. The consumer living along the seaboard, who is familiar with fresh seafood, has not taken readily to prepared seafoods in a frozen state. This particular group represents our largest per capita seafood consumer and if a product can be made suitable for them it should provide a much larger outlet than we now enjoy. Proper quick freezing that retains the natural flavors can be one way of opening this sales outlet.

In common with other frozen foods we suffer from very poor truck transportation facilities. It is almost impossible to get small truck shipments direct to independent chains or large institutional users and when they have to compete under the handicap of high cost delivery charges via express they simply show little interest in the item. As soon as the I.C.C. renders a decision on leased trucks on exempt commodities, we should know where we stand. If the decision is favorable it will open up untold sales outlets to all seafood packers, but the idea is being fought most strenuously both by the licensed truckers and unions. Solid truck load rates are very cheap but not many small packers of process seafood can make up \$15,000 to \$20,000 loads regularly to take advantage of cheap rates. Another disadvantage facing us is the lack of frozen space available in the retail frozen food cabinets.

Since the public has been educated and readily accepts orange juice it is not too difficult to put grape or lemon juice or other juices in a frozen food case, but where a store has never handled shrimp in consumer size packages before, it takes quite an argument to answer the merchant. He points out that he can stock three items of juice which is accepted as part of our daily diet for the price of one package of shrimp, which is not used on the average more than twice a week for the whole family. Our problem is to get our item used on a trial basis and then it will sell itself, but here again the price of our product prohibits free offerings to any great extent.

The public is anxious to find out more about breaded shrimp. There are vast areas unaware of what fried shrimp are and once tasted a lot of free publicity follows. Unlike fruit concentrate it cannot be demonstrated by merely thawing and adding something to it. A number of states and cities prohibit the demonstration of cooked foods in retail outlets where any frying has to be done. A concerted advertising campaign put on by the shrimp trade at large would well repay the effort and expense involved, but for the present we have no group formed to carry this through.

The fillet industry has a successful record of production and sales for over twenty years. Any reputable packer has been able to arrange some financing of his frozen business but it is still limited. With a twenty year record running into millions of pounds sold the fillet processors and distributors have seen the need for trying to get their product listed on commodity markets of the country. If a five or six cent per pound commodity in a raw state has felt the need of financing, one can well understand how much financing an item requires that costs 40c per pound in a raw state.

There are a number of varieties of Florida seafood that can stand further

exploitation by reason of processing, not necessarily by breading. A few attempts have been made successfully on a local retail basis of smoking mullet, spanish mackerel and shrimp. There is room for putting up a smoked fillet of mullet and spanish mackerel for a selected trade over the country but for the present the shortage of cellophane and other packaging materials prevents that opportunity. In time this can run up into a fair volume, since the fish can be processed from a frozen state in the round. It could be a tremendous stabilizing factor market-wise on our two most important seafood catches. It would be interesting to see how much of the salmon trade Florida mullet could be a substitute for after proper exploitation.

Summarizing the outlook as a whole, we have not touched the barest possibilities open to us in Florida by reason of processing our marine resources. A reasonable approach, taking into consideration the limitations outlined here, can be made on a profitable basis by anyone who has the basic equipment required, access to some capital and a willingness to experiment over a period of time.

The Outlook For Shrimp Production

MAX SWARTZ, *President, East Coast Fisheries, Miami, Fla.*

Abstract

IT IS REPORTED from the various sources in the shrimp producing areas that there is over fifteen million pounds of frozen shrimp in the freezers now—more than there was last year at this same time. It appears that the catches of shrimp have been considerably heavier all along the various production points. The results is that the prices in the past two months have taken a sharp decline anywhere from 10 to 15c a pound on all the different varieties of shrimp caught, such as the pink, the brown and the white varieties.

It appears that a lot of these shrimp buyers, who have formerly bought freely are somewhat holding back on account of this inventory. At the present prevailing market prices on the various shrimp, the prices are lower now than they have been in the past four years. This condition will probably exist at least until the Florida shrimp season closes, which is sometime during the end of February.

It is also probable that by that time the market should get better and the price will improve considerably.

It is known that there is a much greater shrimp fleet working the various shrimp grounds throughout the Gulf as well as the South Atlantic including Dry Tortugas which may possibly maintain a steady flow during the closed season. Last season it was estimated that the Tortugas area alone produced seven million pounds of shrimp during the closed season. With this production in view, it is possible we will not have any skyrocketing prices in shrimp for sometime to come.

However, if the general food commodities like meats, poultry, lamb and other varieties of similar type will increase, it is possible that the shrimp will follow.

As long as it is possible to maintain moderate prices on shrimp to be sold to the various consumers, a high demand for shrimp will prevail.

Today shrimp is considered one of the most outstanding commodities in the seafood industry.