



This fish story keeps brokers reeling in sales

By R.J. King
special writer

From the Mississippi delta to area restaurants and supermarkets, a classic Southern favorite making its culinary and economic mark — and it's catfish.

Wait a minute. Catfish? Yep, but it's not the same mean-looking, whiskered 12-pound tough guy that roams the murky bottom of the Mississippi River. This fish, says Denny Inman, is raised by farmers through a process called aqua-culture.

"The hardest thing about selling catfish is overcoming the misconception that all catfish are bottom-feeders and have a slimy taste," says Inman, who is vice president of Paul Inman Associates of Farmington Hills, a full-service food broker that sold \$2.5 million worth of aqua-culture catfish in Michigan last year.

"But there is a great difference with aqua-culture catfish, which are raised in spring-fed ponds and are fed a rich diet of grain and minerals through pellets which float on the surface."

Because the pellets induce the fish to look up, not down, for their food, it's one reason why the aqua-culture variety taste milder and more tender than their river-dwelling counterpart, which prefer to navigate among the mud and silt.

The fish is one of Paul Inman Associates' hottest products. "We first started selling catfish three years ago and sold \$450,000 worth in that first year, and now we've sold over four times that amount," said Dale Murnahan, account executive for Inman's food service division. It's one of our fastest growing lines and should be well into the decade.

AQUA-CULTURE catfish, as well as farm-raised varieties of salmon, trout and shrimp, are also showing up with greater frequency at upscale restaurants, said Milos Cihelka, head chef and co-owner of the Golden Mushroom in Southfield. "With concern of cholesterol so high, the demand for fish is starting to outdistance the supply," he said.

"People are also becoming more leery of lake trout from Michigan's Great Lakes and other bodies of water tainted by chemicals. The farm-raised catfish offers our customers a choice, and actually it's a very mild, sweet-tasting fish, which can be prepared in a variety of ways."

Taking on the classic middle-man role, Paul Inman Associates, which has headquarters on Northwestern Highway, acts as the selling arm for more than 40 national food manufacturers, including Delta Pride Catfish of Indianapolis, Miss., the world's largest aqua-culture catfish processor, controlling more than 64,000 acres of catfish ponds and land once reserved for cotton.

Delta Pride recently inducted Paul Inman Associates into its Million Dollar Club, an award that honors food brokers based on its single-year sales level.

"Rather than have a lot of sales people on staff for each market they serve, Delta Pride and other processors hire a brokerage firm like us to sell their products," Murnahan said. "It cuts down on their overhead and we earn our income through a commission rate."

LIKE MOST food brokers, the company rarely sees the product it sells. From salad dressings and cheeses to coffee makers and shampoos, the company sells to a variety



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Paul Inman Associates has seen its catfish sales quadruple in three years. Showing their product in the company's test kitchen is Denny Inman, vice president of food service, and Dale Murnahan, account executive.

of supermarket chains and food distributors, with deliveries handled by respective manufacturers.

"Of course, we research and inspect the products we sell for quality and taste, but once we've established an account between a food processor and say, a supermarket, it would be a waste of time to warehouse products here when the processor can

just deliver to the supermarket directly," Inman said.

Aqua-culture catfish have accounted for substantial growth for Paul Inman Associates' food service division, according to Inman. He declined to reveal the company's revenues last year, as well as commission rates, but said the company has

been profitable in each of the last 35 years of its existence.

In addition to the company's Farmington Hills headquarters, it has offices in Detroit, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Toledo, Fort Wayne and Indianapolis.

As for the '90s, Inman predicted supermarkets and retail grocery stores would offer consumers a large

choice of entrees to compete with fast-food restaurants.

"The grocery store acting as restaurant is getting larger every day, and it's having a crossover effect on hospitals and hotels as well. But aqua-culture seafood is just beginning to take off, and I think we've only scratched the surface."

Business groups oppose both education proposals

Favor new priorities, same funds

By Doug Funke
staff writer

Two organizations representing business interests in Michigan have been going about it fairly quietly, but there's no mistaking their opposition to the two state proposals on next week's ballot.

Listen to Jay Sweeney, who owns a sales consulting firm in Bloomfield Hills and is chairman of the guardian advisory council of the National Federation of Independent Business of Michigan.

"We don't think throwing money at the problem is the answer," he said. "No one has sat down yet saying this is what you're going to get, chapter and verse, for what we want to tax you for."

"We say, as business people, 'Why not have new priorities with existing revenues?'"

"Michigan spending per pupil is among the top 10 states in the country. Teachers are among the best paid in the country," Sweeney said.

BOTH BALLOT proposals would modify the state constitution and provide more money for financing public education in kindergarten to 12th grade.

Proposal A would increase the state sales tax from 4 cents to 4.5 cents per dollar. Proposal B would increase the sales tax to 6 cents per dollar and reduce school property taxes.

The state chamber of commerce isn't enamored with the two proposals, either. Hear James Barrett, its president.

"There are no quality (of education) promises in either Proposal A and B," he said. "Voters who want more equity between districts won't be helped much by either A or B."

In the case of Proposal A, there's no property tax relief at all. B offers some short-term reduction for some taxpayers, but B guts the Headlee rollback protection against assess-



David J. Baerwalde: Reduce level of regulation and taxation on business and individuals.

ment increases," Barrett said.

The Headlee Amendment generally requires reductions in tax rates to offset soaring increases in property values. Proponents of the ballot proposals say they will shift the method of funding away from property taxes, which they call an unfair method of school financing, while allowing more money to be pumped into the public schools.

NEITHER THE state chamber nor the federation, which primarily represents small businesses, has spent much money to get their message across.

The chamber, with 7,000 members, has contributed about \$15,500 for brochures, polling and legal expenses, Barrett said.

The national federal of independent business, with some 25,000 members in Michigan, has contributed nothing to the campaign, said David J. Baerwalde, state director.

"We don't have ongoing assessments (union dues) every month that pay into coffers and build a war chest," Sweeney said.

He categorized the campaign as grass roots. Pamphlets have been mailed to the most active federation members. They have been asked to talk with their employees and make telephone calls.

"WE'RE TRYING to get information out on presentations, public affairs programs on radio and TV and requests from journalists," Barrett said.

Tax increases generally aren't well-received by business, especially small businesses.

"It's going to decrease operating margins," Baerwalde said. "Our feeling is, whenever possible, we should reduce level of regulation and taxation on business and individuals to grow."

"Michigan is a relatively high-tax and high-expenditure state for education," Barrett said.

"Business would like to see more emphasis from state policy makers on results rather than in putting higher taxes. There's lots of room for improvement with the significant investment we already make in education," he said.

Oakland Business Expo in Southfield

Upwards of 150 sellers of business-oriented products and services are expected to display their wares at the Oakland Business Expo Fall '89 today and Friday at the Southfield Civic Center.

Free admission tickets are available by calling the show's sponsor, International Business Exposition of West Bloomfield, at 737-1500.

"The show is produced to unite buyers and sellers under one roof to see the latest in office products," said Tim Cleary, vice president for International Business Exposition.

"(Buyers) seem to like it because it's on neutral ground," Cleary said. "They see products they might not even know existed."

Between 3,000-4,000 business owners, managers, secretaries and purchasing agents are expected to attend, Cleary said. Show hours are noon to 8 p.m. today and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday.

Consultants and representatives from a couple of colleges looking to interest management types in classes are expected to exhibit in addition to traditional office suppliers.

Even the Internal Revenue Service has indicated that it will send a representative with materials pertinent to business tax questions.

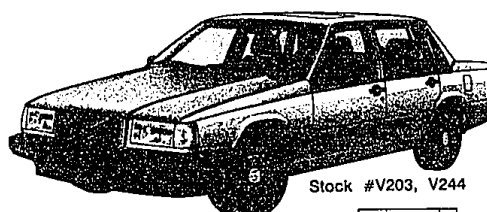
"It's more of an evolution than a revolution," Cleary said of exhibitors' products. "The price of faxes are just dropping so much and the price of car phones is coming down, too."

International Business has put together an office exposition in fall and spring in Detroit since 1981.

The Southfield Civic Center is on Evergreen about a half mile north of 10 Mile.

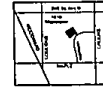
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