

Ideal Fish hopes Branzino facility will be model of successful RAS

By

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In just a few months, Ideal Fish – located in Waterbury, Connecticut, U.S.A. – will harvest its first ever crop of Mediterranean sea bass (branzino) from its 63,000-square-foot recirculating aquaculture system (RAS) facility.

The harvest will mark the culmination of years of work and USD 10 million (EUR 8.4 million) invested in the facility and equipment. Once at full production, the company expects to produce 260,000 pounds of branzino each year; roughly 5,000 fish a week.

That will represent good news for chefs in the surrounding area, particularly New York City and Boston. Branzino has steadily gained popularity in higher-end markets, and currently the only way to get it in the United States is to ship it from the Mediterranean. Ideal Fish, once it begins to harvest, will be the only company supplying branzino in North America.

“Up until now all branzino being consumed in the U.S.A. has come from sea cages in the Mediterranean that are 4,000 miles from the East Coast. This means that the fish has been out of the water for at least five days once it reaches the restaurant,” Ideal Fish Director of Sales and Marketing James MacKnight told SeafoodSource. “We can guarantee our customers delivery, if they’re in an area around our facility, within 24 hours of harvest.”

The process starts with the company acquiring fingerlings from a hatchery located in France. Those fingerlings are kept in a quarantined nursery, fully self-contained, for two to three months to ensure they’re healthy.

After that, the fish are transferred to the grow-out facility. The largest part of the facility, it contains a total of 12 tanks that the fish will spend 12 months in. Once they’re roughly 500 grams, they’ll be “purged” for 10 days to ensure a clean tasting fish, before they’re ultimately harvested and shipped to customers.

The end result, said MacKnight, is a “clean, beautiful tasting fish” that doesn’t use hormones, doesn’t face environmental problems, and doesn’t require antibiotics. They grow up in a carefully controlled, isolated environment.

“We have the luxury of being able to create the perfect environment for the fish,” MacKnight said.

Every fish will be gill tagged, with a QR code that will feature full-chain traceability of every fish. “We’re very strict as far as quality of the fish,” MacKnight said.

So far, the company has secured Monterey Bay Seafood Watch “best choice” recommendations, and is actively pursuing Best Aquaculture Practices certification.

“We’re fully transparent, we want to tell our story to everyone,” MacKnight said.

Ideal Fish also plans to produce more than just branzino. Waste byproducts will, instead of being discarded, be used to run an 8,000-square-foot aquaponics facility capable of producing 75,000 pounds of leafy greens a year. That facility is in the works, and is planned for completion in August 2018.

“At the end of the day, you have a fully self-enclosed contained facility that can harvest and grow top-quality, very clean protein, and use all of the byproducts from growing that protein and grow any leafy green, herby vegetable that you want,” MacKnight said. “We’re not using any pesticides or herbicides, it’s 100-percent organic without us doing anything.”

Fresh, top-quality food isn’t the only goal, however. MacKnight said the company hopes to be a model of what the future of aquaculture can be as worldwide customer demand increases and supply – and the environment – becomes strained.

“First and foremost, we are raising fish in a method that I believe is the most sustainable form of aquaculture,” MacKnight said.

The plan, he said, is to be a fully vertically-integrated facility, from hatchery to harvest, that has tightly controlled parameters on all aspects of the fish’s growth. Sourced from Pentair, the RAS is capable of monitoring every detail of the water, from strength of the current to the specific oxygen and salt content.

The facility also has a lower environmental impact than other forms of aquaculture. Up to 90 percent of the water used can be re-used, and filtration systems ensure little impact on the surrounding environment. Escapes – which have historically been a fear and problem in open-ocean aquaculture – are nonexistent given the facility’s location on land.

“We believe that recirculating aquaculture systems offer the ideal solution to some of the serious challenges facing seafood consumers in this country when attempting to source fresh, high quality, traceable and safe seafood products,” said Eric Pedersen, Ideal Fish’s founder and CEO. “By locating RAS facilities directly into the markets they serve, fish can be supplied directly to retail outlets and consumers virtually on the same day they are harvested. RAS also addresses the critical responsibility of raising enough fish and other seafood products, in a long-term sustainable way, to both feed the growing population and to protect our environment not just for today but well into the future.”

The idea is to be a model of a fully self-contained production facility that can be located within a stone’s throw of populated areas, anywhere in the world. Located entirely on land, and not dependent on the surrounding environment as much as past aquaculture facilities, Ideal Fish hopes the new facility can demonstrate that recirculating aquaculture systems represent a significant part of the future of aquaculture as a whole.

“We’re not coming to market with a branzino per say, we’re coming to market with everything associated with that fish,” MacKnight said. “We’re not just selling the fish, we’re selling the whole process.”