

## Commentary

# Plumbing the aisles for Canadian shellfish at Boston Show

## Strong turnout from East Coast; BC missing in action

BY BRIAN KINGZETT

**I** attended the International Boston Seafood Show this year and came away with some differing perspectives on the marketing of Canadian shellfish. I keep hearing how bad markets are for farmed shellfish but what is clear is that it is hard to complain about markets when you are not doing much marketing as an industry.



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Jeff Madrzak of CPT Plastics shows off the company's flat pack oyster tray, recessed to hold a dozen oysters.

First, for those of you who are not familiar with the Boston show, a couple of quick facts: The International Boston Seafood Show ([www.boston-seafood.com](http://www.boston-seafood.com)) is the largest seafood tradeshow in North America. Expensive to attend and very flashy, the three day show attracts over 20,000 visitors from more than 85 countries. The show organizers claim that the median annual shellfish purchase per visitor company is 2.3 million dollars and that 84% of visitors have purchasing power. In a US consumer seafood market worth more than 55 \$Billion USD, anyone who is anyone is represented there. Considering that I keep hearing that this is an "East Coast" show, I saw or met a significant number of west coast and national buyers and distributors walking the floor.

In its entirety, the show is pretty overwhelming. However, once you get beyond the more than 750 exhibitors covering seven football fields worth of flashy displays, the chef demonstrations, the swag

giveaways and the cute girls proffering samples, there are still a few lessons to be learned about where the marketing of shellfish is going.

The first observation is that if you do not have a presence, you are not marketing and that presence had better be professional. Highly professional tradeshow display booths were the norm, with bright graphics, glossy handouts and fresh samples. Anything less simply came across as substandard and unprofessional. By my count there were more than 40 booths with mussel products, 40 more with oyster products and 39 with clams. The New Zealand Seafoods Inc. booth was probably the most impressive for farmed shellfish with plexiglas column aquaria containing live *Green Shell*<sup>TM</sup> mussels in rope culture.

It was encouraging to see the excellent presentations put across by Canadian east coast provincial pavilions and PEI and Newfoundland mussel producers. The Canadian Aquaculture Industry Alliance (CAIA) had a strong presence with its "Brand Canada" generic marketing booth. Staffed by Fatema Chhil and Executive Director David Rideout it had an impressive display of farmed Canadian products (except BC shellfish) as well as provincial and member marketing information. Two good examples of how relatively small producers can put on a very professional representation included La Maison Beausoleil Inc. (Maurice Daigle and Partners) and Etang Ruisseau Bar Ltd. (Andre Mallet and Alain Mallet) as part of the New Brunswick pavilion.

British Columbia farmed shellfish was noticeably absent and we were only able to find examples of BC oysters as part of a Washington State booth and with one east coast distributor. In comparison was a display of Pacific oysters raised on the Baja Peninsula promoting both HACCP processing and environmental integrity in addition to nice shell shape and meat quality.

The second observation is the increasing trend to value-added, fancy packaging and food safety assurance. Consumer-friendly packaging, including freezer-to-microwave, pre-portioned, marinated, and topped with sauces were common across all types of seafood and finding their way into shellfish. Bright consumer-ready retail packs seemed to dominate much of the show.

Frozen mussels in "boil-in-bag" consumer packs (with sauces) were common with product from eastern Canada, US, Chile, Europe, New Zealand and Asian sources. Frozen steamer clams from Asia in microwaveable bags were being served and seemed

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CAIA's David Rideout at the Brand Canada booth.

like a pretty comparable product to local Manila clams. Significant about this frozen product is that they are not subject to most NSSP restrictions for approved growing waters which may be why they were significantly cheaper than fresh Manilas.

The influence of new techniques for eliminating harmful bacteria in oysters through high pressure hydrostatic processing (HPP) for pasteurizing and pre-shucking oysters was evident with a large "Gold-Band" gulf oyster booth and some of the Washington State Goose Point "Blue Seal" half shell oysters were on display. The Ameripure oyster booth (treated for *Vibrio* by blanching) looked like the cover of a Harlequin romance novel, suggesting the unlikely combination of food safety and increased romantic possibilities.

Goose Point Oyster was also showing off shucked oysters in new freezable plastic trays instead of traditional cans and jars at their distributor's booth. They also had individual oysters packed in shooter glasses with cocktail sauces. New plastic technologies capable of going straight from the freezer to microwave showed up in a number of booths. One Gulf supplier was debuting frozen steamer clams in a plastic microwave tray with sauce. Installed in the middle of the pack was a steam releasing seal to insure that the tray did not explode in the microwave or scald when opened. A colourful cardboard sleeve over the pack showed preparation and other marketing information.

CPT Plastics, which makes the *Sea Breeze Clam Steamers*,<sup>TM</sup> is also making a flat pack oyster tray recessed to hold a dozen oysters, which I saw at booths being used to display frozen top, valve-off oysters. Jeff Madrzak of CPT confirmed significant interest in the use of these

high technology packing solutions for shellfish processing. According to Jeff, value-added products and presentation friendly packaging are expected to become the industry norm in the future for consumer presentations.

In fact, it seemed as if I observed as many shellfish samples in some sort of value-added or consumer-packaged presentation as I did traditional fresh product. Shellfish processors and distributors who regularly attend said that this year represented a significant increase in this trend

My final observation was that there were other options for small shellfish operations to be represented at the show without having to rent expensive booth space. Options include 1) working through provincial associations which have access to the CAIA *Brand Canada* marketing program, (or through CAIA directly) to showcase product and marketing information; 2) by pooling with other small companies (for an extra exhibition fee); or 3) by working through larger distributors which are moving your product. National, regional and provincial pavilions were very common allowing for a regional focus and offsetting costs while allowing individual companies to represent themselves.

Either way I came home to BC really wondering how it is that we can complain so much about poor markets when we are doing so little to make an appearance at places where so many buyers look to become introduced to new products. To attend a show like Boston is to really understand how fast the seafood industry is moving from fresh primary processed fish to more consumer-ready presentations and what it takes to put on a credible marketing presence in a global seafood industry.

All is not lost however, the International West Coast Seafood show will be held in Los Angeles on October 9

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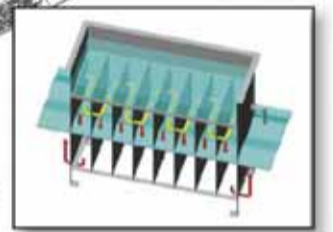
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