



Local fish farm to net global market

Barramundi Asia is poised to become the world's largest barramundi supplier while remaining environmentally sustainable.

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UNDER the unforgiving sun, fish with black, glistening scales splash about the ocean surface eagerly - it is feeding time.

A boat stops at each of the 18 cages at the sprawling farm to feed the 500,000-odd hungry barramundi fish with fishmeal pellets. A diver, tasked with monitoring fish health, surfaces from one of the ocean enclosures.

As Singapore's largest fish farm, Barramundi Asia has 500 tonnes of barramundi fish, and its biomass is growing at a compounded rate of 11 per cent every month. Its current 7.5 hectare farm site is located off Pulau Semakau, and a second 12 hectare site will be ready in the next two years.

Few will expect this large-scale, EU-certified fish farm to be operating right out of Singapore waters.

Even fewer will expect it to supply more than 30,000 portions of premium fish - which are airflown, to boot - to Australia every month.

Call it one of Singapore's best-kept secrets if you will, but Barramundi Asia is now ready to let people in on the "treasure trove", says Andrew Kwan, co-founder of the farm and group managing director of Commonwealth Capital Group, which owns a majority stake in the farm.

The homegrown company has set its sights on the global barramundi market, planning to eventually become a major supplier of the premium Australia species while drawing on sustainable farming practices and remaining eco-friendly.

At the moment, Barramundi Asia exports mostly to hotels and restaurants in Australia, and a small portion to Singapore.

Last week, it launched a farm-to-fork model here, bypassing supermarkets to bring customers fresh barramundi directly. Customers can now buy harvested-to-order fish from www.kuhlbarra.com.

While farms delivering fish directly to the customer is not an entirely new concept, Barramundi Asia's farm-to-fork model is differentiated by its processing of the fish and unbroken cold chain.

Immediately after harvest, the fish are placed in ice water which puts them to sleep. The immobilised fish are then descaled and filleted in a chilled environment before being vacuum-packed, put on ice and sealed in an insulated box for delivery.

This is in contrast to the unprocessed, whole fish which other farms "basically haul out of the water and promptly deliver with zero processing," Mr Kwan says.

With its own AVA-certified processing facilities, the company can also guarantee that the entire cold chain process is not compromised from the moment the fish are harvested to their arrival at the customer's doorstep. This, it says, is a first in Singapore, and cannot always be guaranteed if it sells to supermarkets.

The company is so assured of its cold chain and the product's resulting freshness that its brochure gives a no-questions-asked money-back guarantee if the fish fails the customer's "sniff test".

And in terms of its chances of becoming a barramundi leader, the company displays a similar confidence.

Mr Kwan points out that barramundi, one of the most sustainable species of fish, is likely to be well-received as Singaporeans become more environmentally conscious. The company also conducted research to suss out the market demand here.

To get the market to warm up to the product, the company is offering an introductory price of S\$50 per kg.

In addition to its fillets, it will also roll out a whole fish option in the coming weeks here, because Chinese households prefer cooking an entire fish, Mr Kwan explains.

Globally, barramundi is also widely recognised as a premium white fish, Mr Kwan says.

"The challenge is not so much the demand, but how quickly we can ramp up the supply," he says.

Aside from starting its second farm site here, the company intends to expand its farming operations abroad in a few years, managing director Joep Kleine Staarman says, but Singapore will most likely remain its logistical core. Countries near the equator such as Indonesia are good options because they provide optimal conditions for farming barramundi, says board member Hans den Beiman. To fund its expansion plans, capital markets are an option Barramundi Asia is considering.

The company has faith that its product is superior and sets it apart from the competition. One advantage it has is the farm's location in Singapore's open southern waters, which make for strong currents, oxygen-rich waters and constant temperatures - ideal for fish farming. Most fish farms here are in the north, along the Johor Strait.

Strong currents flush out fish waste and excess feed from the cages, says Dr Guillaume Drillet, an expert in aquaculture and ecological processes with research and consulting group DHI. DHI independently monitors Barramundi Asia's farm waters.

The even temperatures here also maximise output. Mr Kwan likens the farm to a factory "running 24/7, 365 days a year" with constant output, giving Barramundi Asia an edge over other barramundi farms around the world which face more variable temperatures.

From the get-go, the farm has also been using sustainable practices.

Under the leadership of aquaculture heavyweights, Mr Staarman and Mr den Bieman, the farm feeds its barramundi fishmeal from a sustainability-certified manufacturer.

The farm is also certified for Good Aquaculture Practice for Fish Farming by the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA).

Employees take extra care of the environment and the fish, under Mr Staarman's guidance. The Dutchman visits the farm several times a week, sometimes helping out when it is short-handed, be it by diving into the cages or feeding the fish. He reminds his staff to be environmentally responsible and ensures they "actually have a heart for the fish", he says.

Because of Mr Staarman's reminders to not pollute the sea, harvest manager Hussein bin Masor makes a conscious effort to collect any rubbish from the farm and dispose of it when he is back on land.

However, before the company can capture global market share, there is one hurdle to overcome.

In some countries including Singapore, customers and vendors often confuse barramundi for Asian sea bass, even though the latter tends to have a muddy taste and is less nutritious or sustainable.

Lamenting the misuse of the barramundi name, Mr Kwan stresses that education and promotion are hence their imperatives for the year. Barramundi Asia has a slew of marketing programmes lined up for the coming months in Singapore.

Mr Kwan is also confident that Singaporeans will become repeat customers as long as they taste Barramundi Asia's fish, because of its high quality.

"The product sells itself. If people take the first step to try it, we don't have to do anything more," he says.

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