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Intelligence

Live processing differentiates U.S. shrimp brand

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By Lauren Kramer

Mazzetta Company's Oishii Shrimp is trucked live shrimp to processing facilities and frozen within hours. Will this catch on?



Shrimp produced at this farm in Thailand, operated by Charoen Pokphand Foods, are shipped live to a nearby processing plant to optimize freshness. Distributed in the U.S. market by The Mazzetta Company, the product carries the Oishii brand. Photo courtesy of CP Foods.

When Highland Park, Ill.-based Mazzetta company launched [Oishii \(https://www.oishiishrimp.com/\)](https://www.oishiishrimp.com/) in early January, there were two main points of differentiation for its line of premium vannamei shrimp: a larger-than-usual product and one that's shipped to the processing plant while still alive.

"We don't have the water pick-up that shrimp gets when it's sitting in water dead, and for that reason we get a better flavor, a firmer texture and a more vibrant color," said Tom Mazzetta, founder and CEO.

Oishii is the Japanese word for delicious. "We chose this name because this product is as close to sushi quality as you can get for shrimp, so the name references the Japanese idea of freshness," he said.

Such a venture requires a strong supplier partnership. For the past few years, Charoen Pokphand Foods in Bangkok, Thailand, has worked on developing a larger-sized shrimp – 15 shrimp per pound for Oishii, as compared to the industry standard of 16-to-20 shrimp per pound. Oishii shrimp are transported to the processing factories live, which makes the logistics of transportation a lot more complicated and expensive.

"To avoid shrimp damage and mortality the live shrimp must be gradually harvested and the number of shrimp transported at any time is limited to just 30 percent of what we ordinarily transport," said Premsak Wanuchsoontorn, executive vice-president at CP Foods. "Moreover, the level of oxygen in the water and the temperature needs to be carefully controlled with special tanks during transportation."

Mazzetta confirmed: "You're basically hauling a lot of water," he said. "A typical load of shrimp might contain 10,000 pounds while our aerated trucks might carry 3,000 pounds at most. But because our processing facilities are so close to our farms, we can do more trips with our trucks and keep them going back and forth.

CP Foods' research revealed that a distance of 150 kilometers would not negatively impact shrimp survival during transportation, but since the company had compatible shrimp farms readily available within a half-hour's drive of the factories, these were dedicated for Oishii.



The unique live-transport process that goes into making Oishii shrimp is detailed for customers on the back of the packaging. Photo courtesy of The Mazzetta Co.

The shrimp are frozen within four hours of being removed from water. To date the company has dedicated 30 percent of its total shrimp production to Oishii shrimp, and the harvest cycle lasts four-to-five months.

“This shrimp is unique because it’s fully traceable, it’s free of antibiotics and it’s the largest size of white shrimp available,” Premsak said.

“This product is literally what we would call pure,” Mazzetta said. “There are no preservatives, no antibiotics, no soaking, and no chemicals, hormones or phosphates. We believe consumers are more interested in all-natural products, especially regarding imports coming into the United States.”

The Oishii brand is priced 10 to 15 percent higher than regular shrimp. That’s a tough thing to accept in the shrimp business, Mazzetta said, but customers have accepted it. “Because we’re processing shrimp fresh and working with this new generation of vannamei shrimp, we’re delivering a much more vibrant shrimp compared to what we’ve seen in the past,” he said. “On top of the vibrancy and color, you’re getting a more powerful texture and flavor. And since people eat with their eyes, the visual appeal pulls together nicely with a great taste.”

Oishii shrimp is targeted at retail and foodservice, and while the brand constitutes a small portion of Mazzetta Company’s portfolio to date, Mazzetta said he anticipates it will eventually constitute 10 to 15 percent of total shrimp volume: “[U.S.] per capita consumption of shrimp went up last year again and we want to make sure we’re upping that consumption every year. But unless we make sure we do things correctly and more naturally, we’re all going to lose in the long run. Oishii was motivated by a desire to do things better than everyone else and to create a great experience for shrimp consumers.”

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