

PANGASIOUS

The remarkable fish from the Mekong

In 2000, fresh from receiving my masters degree in Agronomy from CIRAD (French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development), I travelled to Vietnam to learn more about the country's aquaculture, in particular pangasius farming. At that time, the culture and sale of pangasius fillets was just starting to be recognised as a major industry.

Seven years on, and pangasius's fame has spread across all continents, but what do we really know about this fish? Or more to the point, what don't we know? The answer to the latter is a lot of things.

To start with, while we all know pangasius is the commercial name for the species, less people know that it is also the genus name. It belongs to the family of shark catfish called *Pangasiidae*, with more than 20 different species native in the Mekong River. Among these is the Mekong giant catfish, also known as *P. gigas*, which is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the planet's largest freshwater fish and can measure up to 3 metres in length and weigh up to 300kg.

Like salmon, pangasius is a migratory fish and carries some fat storage under

its skin on its belly to grow eggs and sperm before maturation. The fish head upstream during the flood season to spawn in Cambodia. The migration dates vary according to the river system.

The catfish purchased today is actually farm-raised and Vietnam has been extremely successful with the aquaculture of two pangasius species. Farmers started with *Pangasius bocourti*, called 'basa' in Vietnamese, and then followed with the more aquaculture-efficient *Pangasius hypophthalmus*, called 'tra'. The latter now represents more than 95% of pangasius exports.

However, globally tra has been given many names, as well as pangasius these include sutchi catfish, white river cobbler, swai, Pacific dory, cream dory, striped catfish and pangas, to name but a few.

Tra can be harvested and processed as quickly as 6-8 months after the fingerlings were first brought to a farm.

This fish is already being distributed into 70 worldwide markets and is already being hailed as one of the most successful whitefish species of all time probably comparable to the seawater catches of Cod and Alaska Pollack. In 2006, Vietnam produced 800,000 tonnes of pangasius and this figure is estimated to reach 1 million tonnes in this year.

With the fast depletion of world stocks, aquaculture has presented itself as best method of preserving our oceans. But the irony is that most farmed fish are carnivorous and need a high level of protein in their diet. Such proteins tend to be sourced from industrial fishing.

However, pangasius with their omnivorous diet only need a small amount of protein. They are most commonly raised with a specially formulated feed, mainly derived from plant matter like rice husk, wheat, sunflower, soyabean, cassava, coconut meal etc and an 8% by-product of non-pangasius seafood.

Pangasius meat is white with firm texture and has a relatively light smell and taste. Fillets are boneless, easy to cook and suitable for all forms of cooking. Many restaurants, including white table cloth establishments and catering business, have switched to this white fish and have developed several innovative preparations.

Jean-Charles Diener
Director
OFCO Sourcing Ltd.



Pangasius and seafood from Vietnam?

OFCO Of course!



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After 7 years of exporting pangasius, working closely with farmers and processors, OFCO knows the market inside out, particularly its problems. Price fluctuations are important but most of the time they are predictable.

We were set up as an intermediary between pangasius suppliers and buyers. Our role is to protect the interests of both parties, which is essential for the long-term development of the industry.

Our expert knowledge of the market has seen us build a reputation for finding the right factory for the right customer. And our expertise has seen us help factories to optimise their capacities, and to make them both more competitive and attractive to customers.

We believe that the success of our partners is our company's success.

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