dgSpeckhartShrimp w/ pics

Shrimp venture a nice catch for Speckhart family

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You’ve heard of surf and turf as an option on a menu.

The Speckhart family from Payson in Adams County actually went from turf to surf, in a sense, as they converted a hog barn into a state-of-the-art shrimp production facility five years ago.

“I used to raise hogs for 28 years, but in 2006, my dad passed away and I got out of the hog business,” said Brent, who runs the farm with his wife, Barb. “I had been looking for something to utilize the building.”

It wasn’t until the couple’s son, Daulton, went to college years later that the family got the idea for the unique venture.

“In 2014, Daulton was going to the University of Missouri and there was a professor there raising shrimp in an old hoop building. Daulton worked on the research farm where they were doing this, and he told me about it and said we should look into it,” Brent said. “I’d been looking for something where I set the price instead of always selling (a commodity) for what they give you.”

The couple subsequently researched shrimp farms in the Midwest and toured one in Fowler, Indiana.

“We looked at that and thought it would be viable,” Brent said.

So, the family renovated the former hog barn into a facility to raise shrimp in 2015. It includes two nursery pools and six finishing pools.

The Speckhart’s son, Dustin, a mechanical engineer major at the University of Missouri, designed and helped set up a filtration system and automatic feeders while Daulton, who lives in Overland Park, Kansas, conducts much of the sales. Their daughter, Brittany, who works in marketing in the Dallas area, takes care of the social media and website {speckhartshrimp.com} for the family’s operation.

“We get a lot of input from our three kids. They are immensely involved,” said Brent, a sixth-generation farmer who was the third generation of the family to serve on the Adams County Farm Bureau Board. “We’re very fortunate for that.”

So, how does the production system work for shrimp?

The Speckharts receive about 30,000 shrimp larvae, that are each about the size of an eyelash, via overnight shipments from a hatchery in Key West, Florida.

The larvae start out in a nursery pool for about 1 ½ months before moving into a finishing pool for about 3 ½ months, for a total production cycle of about 5 months.

The Speckharts feed the shrimp a specialized ration consisting of everything from plant protein and grains to distillers’ products. Brent tests each pool every day for temperature, salinity, oxygen, pH, turbidity and nitrite levels.

They also mix their own chemicals to produce the right level of saltwater for the shrimp, which provides a big savings on inputs compared to ordering prepackaged sea salt.

But shifting from hog to shrimp production wasn’t without its challenges. An oxygen pipe malfunctioned on the farm in 2018 and the Speckharts lost many of their shrimp. About the same time, a hurricane damaged many of the hatcheries in Florida and the Speckharts couldn’t order more larvae and weren’t sure if their operation would sink or swim.

“We were shut down a while,” Brent said. “That actually was a turning point. I let the combine sit two days in October that year and went to an (aquaculture) conference in Kentucky. We learned a lot, and more importantly, we met people who could help us.”

The Speckharts worked with a consultant and greatly improved the efficiency of their shrimp facility. They raise the shrimp to the size of a 20-count, or about 20 per pound.

They sell most of their catch locally and attend a farmers’ market in Overland Park.

“We’ve been going out there every other weekend, and we’ve sold out every time,” Brent said.

Looking ahead, the Speckharts see a big market for locally raised shrimp, as currently about 90% of shrimp consumed in the U.S. gets imported, mostly from Asian countries, Brent noted. They hope to sell more to private chefs, in particular.

The Speckharts also grow corn and soybeans and have a small herd of cattle. END