



CRAIG ELLIOTT

# Fat cats

Californian farmer breeds his 'beautiful' silver and blue specimens to sell live on the lucrative local market

Craig Elliott talks about his catfish almost as if they were pets. From the density of his ponds to the 'sunscreen' in his water, he raises his fish responsibly, he says, and 'lovingly'.

Against a backdrop of contraction in the once booming catfish business of Mississippi, Elliott can afford to be upbeat. He runs Imperial Catfish in California, the biggest catfish farm west of the Mississippi, with 600 acres and a production rate of hundreds of thousands of blue and silver, or channel, cats a year.

All his sales are live – half for the primarily Asian food markets in southern California and half for recreational fishing lakes.

'The Asian culture is to eat the freshest fish available and if you go into the Asian food markets here in California you'll find aquariums where people actually pick out the fish and they'll process them and clean them and will go home and eat them that night,' said Elliott. 'That's how it is in California.'

The pangasius imports from Vietnam that plague the Mississippi people are not a problem for him, principally because he does not process the fish himself as the overheads are too high.

'Everything in California is much more expensive - the cost of feed, land, electricity, water, fuel, labour, everything - and there's no way we could produce fish to process and competitively sell. It's three to four times more expensive to grow catfish in California.'

Without the pressures and costs of processing, Imperial Catfish is thriving and Elliott has no plans to do things differently.

'It's a competitive market but quality is always the key and I'm known in our area as having the highest quality catfish. Our fish is always very clean, I don't ever use any chemicals or antibiotics or anything on the fish and I raise

them in pond culture; they're not raised in circular tanks, it's not a high density operation like tilapia.'

He said a lot of catfish are reared alongside tilapia and the end product has an 'off flavour' and a darker colour.

'Catfish, from my experience, need to be lovingly grown. You can't over crowd them or over feed them because when you do that you start running into problems. Mother Nature is pretty strict in her role and if you start pushing things she'll bite back pretty hard. We try to do everything possible to responsibly raise the fish; they're all raised in open ten acre ponds, we take care of them, we concentrate on water quality.'

Elliott can get a premium for his fish because of their 'beautiful' silver colour – 'that comes from the uniqueness of our farm', he said.

'It is actually in an old ancient lake bed and the soil is clay so you don't lose any water through percolation. It's the same kind of clay you can





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make bowls and pots out of. So that clay puts very fine particulates in the water, it’s sort of like a sunscreen. When you look at my ponds they have a little bit of a milky appearance and that’s the clay in the water. That does a couple of things: it sunscreens the fish so that they don’t have to be very dark and it helps cut down on swings in alga production in the pond. It helps me monitor and regulate water quality a lot better.’

Elliott has been involved in the recreational catfish sector, with his family, for 35 years and diversified into aquaculture by chance.

‘This farm was one of the farms we bought fish from and one day the owner said, ‘how would you like to own a catfish farm?’. I said, ‘I’m not

really sure’ but I took a look at it and thought that would be a good idea.’

That was 10 years ago and, said Elliott, it’s gone well. His manager, who has been in the business for 40 years, also ran a catfish farm in northern California and had some of the very best genetic broodstock, which became the starter fish for Imperial Catfish.

He sourced his blue catfish – ‘distinctly different gene-wise to channel, with smaller heads and a bit more meat on their bodies, and typically growing a lot larger’ – from the only farmer who had blues and bought up his inventory. Now Elliott has the only supply in California.

‘I’ve cultivated it to the point where I have a marketing edge. They are very tasty, fishermen love to catch them and they grow faster and bigger than other catfish.’

Unlike Mississippi catfish reared mainly for

**Clockwise from above:** A big Imperial cat; aerial view of the farm; two to three pounders; one inch fry; hand sorting the daily catch



processing, Imperial's fish for the live market are typically raised to two to three pounds, and slightly less for the recreational lakes. They take around two years to grow, with 'the best feed available'.

This is air blown from a feed tractor into the ponds – around 50 of them, nine to ten acres across – and then there is a feeding frenzy.

'They're very aggressive fish,' said Elliott, with a touch of pride. 'We have a longer growing season because of the warmth and the sunshine where we're located, and my fish are just really healthy, lively, good fish.'

'It's interesting, when we feed they can feel the vibrations of the tractor. And when the feed

**“We have a longer growing season because of the warmth and the sunshine here”**



**Clockwise from top left:** Catfish are also sold for recreational fishing; seine net stretched across a pond; loading the truck; ready to hatch; some really big fish are grown for the lakes; feeding time

is blown out with air across the pond you can actually see a wave of fish swimming towards the feeding area and you can see a ripple or wave in the water of the fish coming and they almost explode on the feed as piranha would. It's pretty neat.'

The fish are harvested almost every day, with a seine or long net stretched at one end of the pond, then pulled by tractors to the other end. The net holes are about two and a half inches wide. Any catfish that is under two or two and a half pounds will pass through the net and go back into the pond. When larger or smaller fish are requested, different size nets are used. Each fish is then hand sorted for exact size and superior quality and then held in holding pens for the morning deliveries.

Each spring, brood fish are placed in ponds that have been dried and cleaned and filled with fresh water. After a few weeks, the spawning cans are checked for egg masses. When found, these eggs are removed from the pond and taken to the hatchery facility where they

are artificially incubated. The eggs hatch in four to eight days, depending on water temperature. The newly hatched fry remain in the hatchery for six to 10 days, then are transferred to Imperial's nursery for grow out to about one and a half inches. These fry are then sold or transferred to production ponds for the final grow out phase.

Elliott's fish can grow to market size in 15 months or less, compared to two or three years in other farms thanks, he said, to superior genetics and the ideal climate.

Farm raised catfish is a lean fish and an excellent source of protein. It is low in saturated (bad) fat and is a moderate source of polyunsaturated (good) fat and omega-3 fatty acids. Imperial claims on its website that its specimens have a 'highly esteemed flavour', mild and sweet with a perfect texture. 'With just one taste of our catfish, you will be hooked.'

It appears this is not just marketing speak. Elliott sells so many catfish he is now thinking of expanding – he has 70 acres for development – to meet demand. 'As it is,' he said, 'I can't raise enough fish.' **FF**

## CATFISH STATISTICS

**US catfish farmers, who are mainly in Mississippi and a couple of other southern states, have pressed for tighter import standards to combat cheaper pangasius imports**

Pangasius, a closely related cousin of catfish, is a white flaky fish that recently overtook cod and crab to become the sixth most popular seafood in the US

**Pangasius lives in fresh water and has barbels or 'whiskers' just like American catfish. It used to be called catfish until Congress prohibited that labelling in 2002**

Pangasius is produced in south-east Asia, mostly in Vietnam

**The amount of frozen pangasius fillets shipped to the US soared to 215 million pounds in 2014 (valued at \$300 million a year), up from seven million pounds in 2004, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

In roughly that same time, US farm raised catfish production fell by nearly 50 per cent from 630 million pounds in 2004 to 340 million pounds in 2012

**From January 2010 to January 2011, more than 20 per cent of the US Catfish Belt producers decided they had reached a tipping point and closed operations, the New York Times reported last August**

Pangasius exporters can sell at nearly \$2.50 a pound lower than the product produced in the US

**As a result, the market has reversed itself since 2003, when US producers had an 80 per cent share, with imports claiming the rest. Today, the challenge for US producers is to hang on to the 20 per cent or so of the market they still have**