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E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481 FAX: 252-328-6300
Ocean fish, fresh from the farm

Aquaculture of sea creatures has commercial promise in North Carolina

BY W. RAWLINS
STAFF WRITER

Chef John Howell recently listed fresh black sea bass as one of the specials at the Bridge Tender restaurant in Wrightsville Beach. He stuffed it with crab, topped it with salsa. “We sold out of them in two nights,” Howell said. “It was sweet.”

But what made the entree really special was that the fish didn’t come from the ocean — it came from a university fish farm.

Someday all the pan-seared black sea bass that chef Howell serves customers at the Bridge Tender may come from a North Carolina bass ranch — if scientists at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and N.C. State University are successful. They’re researching how to raise ocean fish in tanks to meet growing demand among health-conscious consumers.

Two of the most commercially promising species are southern flounder and black sea bass, swim in above-ground heated and cooled tanks of seawater at a former water desalinization plant in Wrightsville Beach, which has been turned into a fish farm and laboratory. The fish dine on experimental diets that include fish meal and alternative protein sources such as plankton and soy meal pellets.

Researchers hope their work and that of colleagues at other universities will launch a new marine agriculture industry for coastal North Carolina, help meet the growing appetite for fish and relieve pressure on dwindling wild stocks of fodder fish such as herring and menhaden.

“Where we’ve stereo a lot of research questions,” said Daniel

SEE FISH FARM, PAGE 12A
Baden, director of the Center for Marine Science at UNC-W and executive principal of Marbionic, a university-based economic development incubator that helped fund the research, "We’re starting to bridge academics with industrial interactions."

Aquaculture is the fastest growing source of food production today, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said. And it has become a national priority in the United States, which imports about 70 percent of the fish Americans consume. Much of that is farmed in other countries to supplement wild harvests.

NOAA is leading an initiative to try to make the United States more self-sufficient in seafood and has helped fund aquaculture research at UNC-W, NCSU and other universities in Texas, Georgia and New Hampshire.

"What is going on in North Carolina is an important component of this overall puzzle," said Michael Rubino, manager of NOAA’s aquaculture program. "They’ve come very fast in a very short time. We have the technology, but are trying to prove it on the commercial scale. I wouldn’t say it’s quite at the commercial success stage."

Federal officials say there is significant potential to increase commercial aquaculture production in the United States. Preliminary estimates by NOAA indicate that domestic aquaculture production of all species could increase from about a half million tons annually to 1.5 million tons a year by 2025.

Raising ocean fish from eggs is more complicated than farming freshwater fish, scientists say, just as keeping a salt water aquarium involves more work than a freshwater aquarium. Ocean fish eggs are smaller and more fragile and difficult to cultivate.

The research in Wilmington indicates the black sea bass are a good candidate for commercial production using sustainable feeds in tank farms. In feeding trials, researchers have successfully replaced up to 70 percent of their diet with soy meal — which could help reduce pressure on harvesting small feeder fish to grind up into meal.

Watanabe

Davis

"We are developing an industry in an era where there is more concern for protecting the environment," said Wade Watanabe, a research professor at UNC-W and the coordinator of the aquaculture center.

Watanabe said researchers needed to demonstrate that the fish can be raised in sufficient numbers in confined spaces and grown quickly enough so prospective farms can predict production.

"I think there is a lot of work to be done in the area of learning how to develop technology for raising these fish in systems that don’t have access to seawater," Watanabe said.

Ted Davis, a principal in Aquaplanetations, a Wilmington company formed to develop farms, wants to transfer the university research into a commercial fish operation. He said right now the capital costs for launching the farm remain steep — $700,000 for a fish farm with a recirculating water system that would produce 100,000 pounds of fish.

In a collaboration with university researchers, Davis has provided some tanks and equipment at the aquaculture center to raise sea bass. He has also acquired an eight-acre site near the airport to eventually locate a farm. He has sold some fish to restaurants and expects to have more marketable fish in about 18 months.

"I would like to be part of launching an industry for the state," Davis said. "I see marine aquaculture developing much like the swine or poultry industry. Seafood is the last wild product left. You don’t go out and kill a turkey or pig. It’s grown. In order for us to have seafood, there is going to have to be an agriculture system."

wade.rawlins@newsobserver.com
or (919) 829-4528
Medical cost data put online

Blue Cross aims to spur discussion

BY TIM SIMMONS  
STAFF WRITER

Hoping to trigger discussions between patients and doctors about the cost of health care, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina posted prices online Thursday for hundreds of services from a routine physical to a coronary bypass.

While the service is immediately useful for Blue Cross members who want to track and possibly save for future health-care expenses, it is more important for what it represents as the industry pushes consumers to play a larger role in holding down health-care costs.

"Coverage is header toward offering employees a variety of high-deductible plans," said John McDonnell, a partner in Progressive Benefit Solutions of Raleigh. "To make good decisions about those plans, consumers need good information about the costs of health care. This is a step in that direction."

The future of high-deductible plans is uncertain, but the idea behind them is to hold down annual premiums by requiring patients to meet deductibles that are much higher than traditional health insurance — anywhere from $2,000 to $10,000 a year.

But deciding how much money to set aside is virtually impossible when consumers have no idea how much health care actually costs.

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield program allows members to calculate those costs for medical procedures, prescription drugs, office visits and dozens of services offered on an outpatient basis or after being admitted to a hospital.

It's possible that people might look at the costs and simply delay care, said Steve Graybill, a senior benefits consultant for Mercer Human Resource Consulting in Charlotte.

"But I may also say, 'This is really bothering me,' and go back to my physician and ask if there are other alternatives at a lower cost," Graybill said. "It gets that conversation going."

Blue Cross is not the first insurance company to offer such information, but as the largest insurer

SEE INSURANCE, PAGE 3D

INSURANCE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

in North Carolina, it will likely nudge other insurers or health-care providers to provide more information than currently available.

"We hope by leading by example, others will follow," said Don Bradley, chief medical officer for Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina. "We see as part of our mission to improve the health of all North Carolinians, and part of that is having better information."

The transparency ends, however, when it comes to providing charges levied by specific doctors. Some insurance companies make such details available in a few metro areas of the country so consumers can comparison shop among doctors.

Sure, consumers have some responsibility, but you don't want to be sitting there with a calculator and some Web site trying to decide if you can afford an MRI."

ADAM SEARING, HEALTH ACCESS COALITION, N.C. JUSTICE CENTER

But Bradley said in North Carolina, Blue Cross decided it was more important to simply get the conversation started between patients and doctors.

Insurance companies are also walking a fine line when it comes to how much information the want to share, McDonnell said.

While customers need to be informed if they are going to help hold down costs, insurance companies aren't eager to let competitors know the specific reimbursement rates they have negotiated with every provider. In some cases, contracts with providers might even prevent it.

Critics of high-deductible insurance say that type of conflict underscores its basic problem.

"I really think it's about trying to deflect blame and say it's a the patient's responsibility," said Adam Searing, project director at the N.C. Justice Center's Health Access Coalition in Raleigh. "Sure consumers have some responsibility, but you don't want to be sitting there with a calculator and some Web site trying to decide if you can afford an MRI. What kind of health-care system is that?"
Fired lacrosse coach will sue

Duke wants case to go to arbitration

BY ANNE BLYTHE
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM - Mike Pressler, the former Duke lacrosse coach, no longer wants a judge to rescind his confidential settlement agreement with his former employer.

Instead, lawyers for the fired coach plan to pursue a slander case against Duke University.

Pressler, who last his job at Duke several weeks after his 2006 team's infamous spring break party, was not in Durham County court Thursday when his attorneys announced their intentions.

Although legal documents filed Wednesday lay out the new allegations, Jay Trehy and Don Strickland, the lawyers representing Pressler, said they would have to start over with a new court case.

Pressler has alleged that John Burness, Duke's senior vice president of public affairs and government relations, made slanderous and defamatory remarks about him to the media. According to the documents filed this week, an April 9, 2007, article in the New York newspaper Newsday quoted Burness as saying the difference between Pressler and current lacrosse coach John Danowski was "night and day."

The second comment came in June 2007, when Burness reportedly told The Associated Press, "It was essential for the team to have a change of leadership in order to move forward."

In court Thursday, lawyers representing Duke vowed to fight the allegations.

John M. Simpson, a lawyer from the Washington, D.C., office of Fulbright & Jaworski, a large international law firm representing Duke, argued that any case by Pressler against his former employer should go through arbitration first.

Simpson argued that when Pressler started at Duke in 1990, he signed an agreement to go through an arbitration process with any employment complaints.

Trehy argued Thursday that Pressler could not be held to that agreement in a slander case because the remarks came after his employment at Duke had been terminated.

Legal experts say that cases of slander — or harmful statements that damage a person's community standing and integrity — are difficult to prove, because it must be shown that the speaker acted with malicious intent.

Pressler was fired in April 2006, at the height of public condemnation of the lacrosse team after an escort service dancer alleged that three players had gang-raped her at a team party.

The players were vindicated nearly a year later as victims of a rogue prosecutor and declared innocent of all charges by the state attorney general.

Pressler threatened to sue Duke, but in the spring of 2007 he reached a confidential financial settlement with his former employer.

Pressler spent 16 seasons at Duke, building a powerhouse team that won three Atlantic Coast Conference championships, took part in the NCAA tournament 10 times and advanced to the national championship final in 2005.

Since losing his job in April 2005, Pressler has written and promoted a book, "It's Not About the Truth: The Untold Story of the Duke Lacrosse Case and the Lives It Shattered."

He now coaches the men's lacrosse team at Bryant University in Rhode Island.

anne.blythe@newsobserver.com
or (919) 932-8741
For the past two days, a small piece of nylon loop hanging from the rearview mirror of an unknown person’s car on the ECU campus has been a lead news story. The media then link that “noose” to a piece of rope found in a residence hall last fall that may or may not have been a noose. If you can’t tell, then it’s not. Most Greenville residents know quite well what a hangman’s noose looks like. For about 20 years, every time we sat at the light on Fifth Street at Reade Circle we were staring at the side of The Attic that had their logo painted large on it: a hangman’s noose. Nobody said a word, nobody was bothered, not news. It sold thousands of T-shirts with its logo large on the front. Those T-shirts went everywhere and are in the back of a lot of closets around Greenville. Nobody said a word, nobody was bothered, not news.

I wonder what would happen if the delightful founder of The Attic returned and restored his old logo. That would be noticed, it would be news, but his only bigotry was against Elvis’ music.

The ECU police crime reports for 2002-04 (available on the Web) show not one racial or hate crime incident on campus, in residence halls or on adjoining non-campus property. Nobody notices, not news. There were reported multiple forcible sex offenses, but nobody notices, not news. Last Halloween, 10 ECU students were transported to the emergency room with presumed alcohol/drug poisoning. They did not die, so nobody notices, not news.

There needs to be a little perspective here about the real problems. And, some people need to get a life.

BRIAN MCMILLEN
Greenville
Gang initiation e-mail is a hoax, officials say

The Daily Reflector

An e-mail circulating though local workplaces about a gang initiation involving the rape of young women is a hoax, law enforcement says.

The message has circulated at East Carolina University, Pitt County Memorial Hospital and other workplaces, according to an e-mail forwarded to The Daily Reflector and calls to local law enforcement.

The Greenville Police Department reported that it has received several calls concerning the e-mail.

The message states that, as part of a gang initiation rite, young females will abducted, raped, beaten and left for dead.

The message says that four such attacks have occurred and urges recipients to take precautions.

The Greenville Police Department has not received any reports such as those in the e-mail, a police official said.

An official in the Pitt County Sheriffs Office said the agency also has not received any reports of such attacks.

Officials at the hospital and university news bureaus said they were not aware that e-mail had been circulating at the institutions and neither had issued an official warning about the hoax.
Before actor Will Smith was one of the "Men in Black," Johnny Cash was the original man in black.

Known for his dark clothing, deep voice and stoic demeanor, Cash sold more than 90 million albums during his nearly 50-year career, making him one of the most influential American musicians of the 20th century.

One of Cash's most notable songs is now the title of a theatrical production.

"Ring Of Fire: The Johnny Cash Musical" will be performed at 7:30 p.m. Sunday at East Carolina University's Wright Auditorium. The one-night performance is part of the S. Rudolph Alexander Performing Arts Series.

Cash, who died in 2003, is not a character in the jukebox musical.

Instead, from the core songs that made Cash famous, "Ring of Fire" is a musical show drawn from his life. A cast of 14 performers sing and dance through the world that Johnny Cash created through his music with stories of love, redemption, family and conflict.

Cash's success as a musician is incomparable. He received 11 Grammy Awards, including a 1999 Lifetime Achievement Grammy, inductions into the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and a Kennedy Center Honor. He placed 48 singles on the Billboard Hot 100 Pop charts and more than 130 hits on the Billboard Country singles chart, more than any other artist in music history.


In the early 1960s, Cash's career was taking off. His rendition of "Ring of Fire" was a hit, reaching No. 1 on the country charts and entering the Top 20 on the pop charts. "Ring of Fire" was written by June Carter and Merle Kilgore and details Carter's moral conflict over her love for Cash. Both Cash and Carter were married to other people at the time.

"Ring of Fire" was created by Tony Award winner Richard Maltby Jr. who also wrote "Ain't Misbehavin'," the Thomas Wright "Fats" Waller musical that paid tribute to black musicians of the 1920s and '30s.

"Ring of Fire" opened on Broadway on March 12 at the Ethel Barrymore Theater. Its run was short lived and concluded on April 30.