

Tilapia royalty

Regal Springs
takes a different
approach to
raising fish

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: BONIWING LEE

BY HANA MEDINA

FARMED FISH MAY have a tough reputation in the media. However, I was pleasantly surprised to learn that Regal Springs, a family company and producer of Kirkland Signature™ Frozen Tilapia, has been doing things differently from the start. It's an industry leader, a steward of the environment and the communities in which its employees work, and fully committed to humanely raising healthy, top-quality fish.

Magdalena Wallhoff, part owner of her family's company, says, "The market is flooded with cheaper tilapia, and the challenge is differentiating what you're selling from everything else that's on the market."

Wallhoff chats candidly in a restaurant down the street from her satellite office in Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood. Her father, Rudi Lamprecht, a Swiss businessman, founded Regal Springs in Java in the mid-1980s as a farmed catfish operation. But two years later, his catfish were not thriving in Java's clear waters. A business partner approached him about raising tilapia instead.

"Tilapia was not a popular fish at the time," says Wallhoff. "But it was a very viable fish for the waters that we were in." The fish

flourished. They did so well, in fact, that the company had a surplus and needed to seek other sales avenues.

Lamprecht connected with a partner in the U.S. and sent his first frozen container to North Dakota in 1990, which was the start of a prosperous export business. The company landed the account of a popular chain restaurant, which allowed it to not only grow the business, but also raise tilapia's popularity and inadvertently pioneer the fish in the U.S.

Regal Springs eventually expanded to Sumatra, to the rural and pristine Lake Toba, a deep crater lake where Costco currently sources most of the tilapia for its frozen Kirkland Signature product. Regal Springs also has farms on lakes and reservoirs in Honduras and Mexico, where some of Costco's fresh tilapia is raised.

Healthy environment, healthy fish

As a company that processes 100,000 metric tons of live fish each year, Regal Springs makes taking care of the environment a top priority. It works with local watersheds and communities to prevent pollutants from entering lakes.

A row of circular floating cages on Lake Toba, Sumatra.

"We have floating cages, and we use less than 1 percent surface area of any lake, so this is not high-density farming," stresses Wallhoff. "And we only farm where tilapia already exists in the water, so we're not introducing a foreign species into a water body."

The fish are fed only as needed by hand, using primarily vegetable-based feed. This is done to prevent overloading the lake with foreign nutrients. The feed is made mostly of soybean meal, premium grains and cereals (including wheat and rice bran) and cornmeal. Other farmed fish are often given feed with fish as an ingredient, but the diet significantly reduces Regal Springs tilapia's exposure to mercury. When they're young, fish are given probiotics to strengthen their immune system, but never growth hormones or antibiotics. Wallhoff adds that the company and third parties constantly test the water and feed

to enforce Regal Springs' standards.

Caring for the environment "is really tied into our business model," she says. "It's sincere and in our best interest to fight for the environment. It's as simple as that."

Efficient processes, zero waste

The fish begin in hatcheries on land. Once they're big enough, they're taken from the hatchery to the lake and placed in large, round floating cages that never touch the bottom.

They're raised to a certain weight, depending on the specifications of individual retailers. "Costco likes thick and long pieces of white meat on the frozen side, so we have a higher harvest weight to meet Costco's demands than other producers," explains Wallhoff.

"The Costco fish is a different model," she continues. "In good farming practices, there's great control. Our loins taste super clean. It's all white meat. The bloodline's been trimmed away, leaving it the perfect substitute for any poultry or white fish recipe."

Nets are hauled to shore, and the fish are trucked to the processing facility. They are

immediately cleaned, gutted, filleted by hand and flash-frozen in state-of-the-art facilities. This minimal process prevents them from needing to be treated with sodium tripolyphosphate, a common seafood preservative.

Regal Springs' zero-waste policy means every part of the fish is turned into something else: gelatin and collagen for the pharmaceutical and beauty industry, fish scale chips (popular in Asia), animal feed, fish oil and biodiesel (which runs Regal Springs' trucks and generators). Wastewater and other solids from the processing plant are composted or used to fertilize surrounding agricultural lands.



Clockwise from right: Costco buyer Adam Matkin (left) shows off young tilapia with employees of the Lake Toba farm; fishermen harvest mature tilapia; an employee hand-feeds growing fish.

Supporting the communities

Regal Springs sponsors several philanthropic programs for its employees and the communities in which it operates. Programs include adult education and literacy, public health interventions (everything from medical care to providing toilets and stoves), domestic violence and sexual harassment prevention, road building and a microloan program that teaches locals to farm fish.

Wallhoff explains that it's important to provide access to resources to help employees meet basic survival needs. Not only does this improve their quality of life, but it also helps them stay focused and driven.

"Our philosophy is to foster a healthy, educated community that values our presence. It's this mutual respect. If we're just using [employees'] physical energy and their resources and not giving back, there's no relationship of respect and mutual growth," she says. "But we're still in all the communities where we first started. The proof is in the people and the loyalty and the support that they have for the company." **C**

SUPPLIER PROFILE

COMPANY Regal Springs

FOUNDER AND CEO Rudi Lamprecht

EMPLOYEES 8,000-plus

HEADQUARTERS Miramar, Florida

PHONE 954-283-9035

WEBSITE regalsprings.com

ITEMS AT COSTCO

Kirkland Signature Frozen Tilapia. Inventory varies by location for: fresh tilapia, Basil Pesto Tilapia, Multigrain Breaded Tilapia, Tortilla Crusted Tilapia, Panko Tilapia

QUOTE ABOUT COSTCO

"I was not a Costco member until I recognized how stringent they were—what their expectations are and how they really delve into the issues—and how much they asked real questions about where the food comes from. I was like, 'Oh, if they care to ask me these questions, they must do that with other products, too.' Now I'm a faithful shopper."

—Magdalena Wallhoff

