

# Plano man seeks to spread mudbug mania

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## Cajun Crawfish Co. owner dishes out a real taste of Louisiana

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By [CHERYL HALL](#) / The Dallas Morning News

GARLAND – David Snell stirs a steamy vat with a boat paddle, then uses its blade to hoist out a fist-size crawfish.

"This guy's a monster," he says delightedly, flipping the crimson critter onto a plate.

As Mr. Snell deftly casts off the crawfish shell, a small group standing around his cooking trailer watches appreciatively, eagerly awaiting the real show.

"I'm the official taste-tester to see how they're seasoned and how much more time they need," he says, deeming this batch fully armed. "Fortunately, I still have a tongue."

For two crawfish seasons, the 32-year-old owner, cook, driver and clean-up man of Cajun Crawfish Co. has been dishing out a little bite of the bayou to North Texas. Crawfish boils, ubiquitous events in Louisiana and Mississippi, are still fairly foreign in these parts.

Mr. Snell hopes to change all that.

On this day, he's about to serve 120 pounds of crawfish with traditional fixings of corn on the cob, red new potatoes and mushrooms on the loading dock of Alliance Datacom LP, a Garland-based company that resells wide-area networking equipment.

Its Mississippi-bred owners want to show their appreciation to employees and customers with a midday meal that will set their mouths aglow.

"My partner and I grew up having crawfish boils every year," says Jim Smylie, a repeat customer from last season who says Mr. Snell's offerings live up to tough Southern standards. "David put together a turnkey solution so that Steve [Taggart] and I can sit back, have fun and don't have to do it ourselves."

Crustacean connoisseurs are highly discerning, after all.

"There is this stereotype that if you cook crawfish, you must be from somewhere in Louisiana," says Mr. Snell, who was born in Rochester, N.Y., and moved here in the first grade. "You're not going to get any Cajun blood out of me, but there are a lot of transplants from Louisiana here who like the way I cook 'em."

The Scubadillo Dive Club of Dallas liked the crawfish at its annual fund-raiser earlier this month so much that the group rebooked for next year. "He was phenomenal," says Laura Greig, the controller of a uranium mining company. "He gets only the select, larger crawfish, and they were gone in a hurry," all 525 pounds of them.

### Thinking big

Back at his Dallas recruiting office that overlooks the High-Five construction on LBJ Freeway, Mr. Snell puts a calculator to his crawfish business. He figures he'll bring in about \$30,000 this season, which began in early February and will peter out by the end of June. But he has no idea at this point how much of that will be profit.

No, this isn't going to make Mr. Snell a rich crawdaddy. Yet.

His vision, though, is to have trailers all over town doing crawfish boils, selling thousands of pounds of live critters via his Web site, [www.cajuncrawfishco.com](http://www.cajuncrawfishco.com), and operating a bayou-chic restaurant. Franchising might be on the horizon, he says. Who knows?

Mr. Snell isn't one to think small.

And given that his day job as an information technology headhunter is more than a tad slow these days, crawfish is tiding him over. While he's out on a boil like this one at Alliance, he works the crowd, spreading the name of his staffing-services employer, DataPro Consultants Inc. of Dallas.

"I got a new position for me to work recently by offering a price break on my crawfish to a guy at a local medical software company," he says. "Who'd have thought that live or boiled crawfish would get my foot in the door with some companies better than company-logo coffee cups?"

He expects to sell nearly 12,000 pounds of boiled crawfish this year for private parties, corporate events and outdoor boils for supermarkets.

Mr. Snell gets his crawfish from a supplier down south in Branch, La. If he orders by 3 p.m., he has them the next morning.

He has broad shoulders like a bodybuilder from lifting 35-pound sacks of crawfish and stirring with a boat paddle. He looks as if he could hold his own in a fight.

### **Determined**

"I'm highly competitive, but not obnoxiously so," he says, not entirely convincing on that last point.

"Anybody else boiling crawfish in town or selling crawfish on a corner had better have a health permit, a fish retailer's license and tax documents, because I didn't go through all this to get run out of town by anyone who's not following the rules."

Mr. Snell may be affable, but he's also an entrepreneurial piece of work.

Cajun Crawfish Co. is actually his second sideline venture. His first, a truly fly-by-night operation called Starlight Tours of Addison, takes couples up at \$160 an hour for romantic flights around light-studded Dallas.

The 1988 graduate of Plano East High School started that business on the weekends when he was a college sophomore. It helped him build flight hours while getting his bachelor's degree in aviation at Louisiana Tech University.

Eleven years later, he still uses Starlight to log about 150 flying hours a year and make a few bucks in the process.

"I run the business using rented airplanes, so I don't have to worry about overhead, maintenance or payments on the plane," he says. "I don't owe anything when I'm not flying."

Mr. Snell was the first tour operator back in the Dallas skies after Sept. 11 grounded operations for three months. Word from Washington came in the nick of time on Dec. 17 to salvage part of his Christmas lights season.

Brazen about seeking free publicity, Mr. Snell was back in the air in less than three hours with WFAA-TV (Channel 8) reporter John Pronk, who did a TV story about the resumption of aerial tours. A guy proposed to his girl while circling the buildings of downtown on that flight – just one of nearly 100 successful marriage pitches made on Starlight tours.

He puts on crawfish events for a number of grocery stores (including a Flagship Tom Thumb, several Albertson's and a Rainbow Foods), supplying them with 1,000-plus pounds of crawfish at a discount. In return, he gets refrigeration for his inventory that has to stay cool and crawling until they aren't.

"I don't hear them scream," says Mr. Snell, shuddering slightly as he thinks about the sound some people hear when crawfish hit the boiling water. "To tell you the truth, not that I'm Captain Greenpeace, but I really hate putting the crawfish into the water."

"So each time I do a boil, whether it's 100 pounds or 1,000 pounds, I save a few crawfish and let them out in a pond or creek near my house. I haven't had any wheels fall off of my trailer, so maybe the karma's working."

### **Cooking up a plan**

Mr. Snell and Vince Callender, a former college roommate, got the idea for the company three years ago. They'd noticed crawfish boils at the Albertson's near their old campus in Ruston, La., but had never seen a cooking trailer at a grocery store here.

"We didn't have a clue how to cook crawfish," says Mr. Snell. "We didn't know a thing about 'em other than we liked the way they tasted."

Good fortune would lead Mr. Snell to a guy from southern Louisiana who'd decided to hang up his boiling pots here and was willing to share trade secrets accumulated over 20 years of doing crawfish boils.

Mr. Snell and Mr. Callender bought a used trailer rig for \$4,000 – "thinking we were getting the full Monty" – only to learn that it needed another \$3,000 in equipment to function properly. That wiped out the season's profits and then some.

His buddy's interest in the venture waned after that, leaving Mr. Snell boiling on his own this year.

Billy Moore, store director of the Flagship at Preston and Frankford roads, says crawfish boils create quite a stir with customers who love the food and the festival atmosphere Mr. Snell whips up.

Recently, Mr. Snell's rig was parked in front of the Far North Dallas store. The phones started ringing with customers asking when the crawfish would be ready. "I had to tell them that David wasn't doing a boil; he was just picking up supplies," Mr. Moore laughs.

Mr. Snell's big secret to crawfish is to use two pots. Boil the crawfish in plain water for 10 to 15 minutes, then move them to a second pot filled with highly seasoned, cooler water. The shells constrict, he says, sucking in the seasoning.

"We season the meat you eat, not the shells you throw to your feet," he says with practiced rhythm.

He closely gauges how many crawfish it'll take to satisfy each hungry hoard. Generally he figures 2 to 2 1/2 pounds per mouth.

The last thing Mr. Snell wants is leftovers.

"David isn't peeling any tails. He's not in that business yet," he says. "Although I might become Bubba Gump out there husking crawfish if things don't pick up here."