

# Conch farm opens in Key West

By C.C. HEMINGWAY

Entertainment Columnist

KEY WEST – Conch Republic Seafood Company's long-awaited Conch Farm Research and Education Center in Key West is finally open to the public. The grand opening party, held Sept 27 at the new facility behind the restaurant at 631 Greene St., was a splendid event. The reception featured several dishes prepared exclusively for the occasion such as conch lasagna, conch stuffed mushrooms and a conch sevice which was out of this world.

"In the future mariculture and aquaculture are going to be the place we'll have to turn to for food," said Dean Rollings, founder of the organization.

"According to the United Nations, in 20 years the rest of us will look like China does now and the thing they can't figure out is how to raise enough protein to sustain the population. The way things are going we can only look to the ocean and the reason we're focusing our research on conch is that it's the highest source of protein that comes from the sea."

They are also looking at mutton snapper, flounder, sturgeon and snook; determining what animals can be raised in a cultured environment. Tilapia is already being farmed successfully. They're growing tilapia in warehouses in New York City and serving fresh fish in the restaurants there.

Conch, at the bottom of the food chain, is an excellent candidate for a large food source to feed the masses. It has positive cholesterol, no saturated fats, and no known viruses or bacteria once the animal is mature. It ranges from Venezuela to Bermuda and the opportunities for farm-raising are extensive. Conch, which grazes on algae exclusively, is not a bottom feeder; so there's a high quality of meat with relatively low contaminants.

There are six different species that live in the Caribbean, but the queen is the most popular. Some other varieties like the hawkswing that grow really quickly and are native to these waters are being marketed as escargot. There are many varieties that grow at varying rates and taste differently. When harvested at the peak of the shell size they're considered sweet and crunchy. Once they mature, however, the shell starts to get thicker, not larger, and the animal gets more compressed. The meat gets tough. Optimum maturity is 3-4 years while they're



PHOTOS: C. C. HEMINGWAY



Dean and DeAndrea Rollings are shown in photo at left. Above is a Queen Conch out of her shell.

still considered "rollers." When farmed they can be harvested at any time.

"What we've done," Rollings said, "is designed a closed, renewable system. High density mariculture produces a lot of pollutants that contaminate the water, so we're finding systems that will put the water back in better than it comes out."

A higher quality food has also been developed by Dr. Bob Glazier at the Florida Marine Research Institute with the Conservation and Wildlife Commission. They're experimenting with different nutrients, measuring growth rates to determine the optimum diet. Diet also affects the taste of the meat as well as the color of the shell.

"I have a small interest in a conch farm down in Turks and Caicos" Rollings said, "and one of the things they do there is to grow the animals in concrete tanks, which stunts their growth substantially. Here we're experimenting with different kinds of bottoms from glass to shell/coral and coral sand from the Keys. It will help us to determine the best nursery conditions."

"Last year we began placing tanks into the classrooms in the school system to be nurtured by the children," Rollings said. "It gives us an opportunity to talk about water quality while we're setting up the tanks. The kids get to learn about the ecology, about endangered species; and then as the year comes to an end and the conchs grow up, they also get to go out and re-stock them in the water, so they have an active participation in the whole process. The project has been voted best field trip in Key West."

Placing the tanks and educat-

ing the kids has been a co-operative effort. Everyone's involved; Founder Dean Rollings, Hatchery Manager Bob Morrow, Conch

Mama DeAndrea Rollings, a long-time friend Dr. Megan Dav Hodgkin from the Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute.

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