

DELICACY

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DEMAND FOR HAIRY CRABS RISE IN CHINA

More consumers are splurging on local luxuries, doubling their prices

SHANGHAI

LATE in the afternoon on a recent weekday, workers at an aquaculture farm near Shanghai used long pincers to move 300g of crabs from muddy ponds into small pools of freshwater.

By morning, the crabs — their shells cleansed of dirt — will be packed into gift boxes and shipped to customers all over China.

These are no ordinary crustaceans: They are hairy crabs, a delicacy that can cost as much as 2,700 yuan for a box of eight and

can only be purchased for a few weeks in autumn.

Prices for some of the most popular crabs have doubled compared to a year ago. Demand for hairy crabs in China is expected to reach 150 billion yuan this year.

Even as China's economic growth slows down amid Covid-19, the pandemic has been good for farm owner Ma Mingjun's business.

In normal years, many Chinese people give hairy crabs as gifts to special relatives, important customers or government officials.

However, big-spending consumers who haven't been able to shop in Paris or Milan are also now treating themselves to more home-grown luxuries.

"Almost all the hairy crabs in our pools have been reserved, much faster than last year," Ma said.

"To offset the frustration of



Workers counting, weighing and sorting hairy crabs at the Shengmiao Eco Farm on the outskirts of Shanghai, China. BLOOMBERG PIC

travel restrictions, many customers are buying bigger crabs to share with their families."

Demand for hairy crabs in China was about 120 billion yuan last year and is expected to reach 150 billion yuan this year, according to consultancy firm AskCI Consulting.

The bestseller this year costs 1,600 yuan per box, up from 800 yuan last year.

Chinese consumers usually steam the tiny crustaceans for about 15 minutes before serving them with vinegar, minced ginger and rice wine.

Diners first pull off the legs, poking into them with chopsticks to dig out the meat.

Usually the next step is to take off the shell and access the roe, although some connoisseurs can

consume the meat and roe while keeping the shell intact.

It's not just the pandemic raising the demand for hairy crabs.

Eastern China is a major production hub for hairy crabs, and for many years, most of the supply stayed in the Shanghai area.

Consumers elsewhere often had difficulty getting them.

Now, with the expansion of logistics operations to service e-commerce operations like Alibaba Group Holding Ltd and JD.com Inc, farmers can more easily send crabs long distance.

Cainiao, the logistics subsidiary of Alibaba, can deliver fresh crabs to domestic buyers within two days of receiving orders, and consumers in Singapore this year can get deliveries of crabs from Alibaba's Taobao platform. **Bloomberg**