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FOOD

## Barramundi Asia: Super fish from Singapore swim out to the world



*You have heard of Kobe beef from Japan. And if Barramundi Asia has its way, there'll soon be an equivalent for fish from Singapore. Some might scoff at the seemingly tall order but don't knock it down till you see Barramundi Asia's fish.*



*A peek into Barramundi's underwater world. The farm occupies 7.5 ha on the open sea, with a production capacity of 500 tonnes.*

Barramundi Asia is Singapore's first and largest farm to rear barramundi out of large sea-cage enclosures in the open seas. The farm occupies 7.5ha – equal to 10 football fields – off Pulau Semakau, boasting a

current annual production of 500 tonnes.

Strong currents and a constant temperature of 29 degrees Celsius create a conducive environment for the finned creatures to grow. After being harvested, they are packed and sold under the Kuhlbarra label.

Mr Joep Staarman, Barramundi Asia's managing director, likens the fish-nurturing process to that of raising children. "We take care of them from babies – the fry comes from Australia – to teenagers to young adults."

When the weight of the fish hits 4.5kg, it is harvesting time. "Any older and bigger, the flesh is not so succulent," explained Mr Staarman, who started the company seven years ago.



Every day, a professional diver plunges into the sea depths to check on the well-being of the fish.

#### Creating a super fish

The fish are fed fish feed pellets that contain salmon oil, protein-rich vegetables and soya bean, formulated by a sustainability-certified manufacturer, up to four times a day. Said the company's marketing manager, Ms Eva Lim: "At each stage of the life cycle, the carbohydrate, protein and fat content ratios of the feed are calibrated for the optimal health and growth of the fish."

"Each batch of feed is traceable. Like if a fish falls ill, we know exactly which batch it ate. This gives us greater control and consumers a peace of mind."

"The best way to grow healthy, good-tasting fish is by using high-quality feed and giving them a good living environment like clean ocean waters that we have here," Mr Staarman on the company's secret to churning out 500 tonnes of top-grade barramundi annually.

Every day, a professional diver plunges into the sea depths to check on the well-being of the fish and stringent tests are conducted on randomly selected fish four times a year, while all fish for sale are tested every week.





Mr Kwan (left) and Mr Staarman work impeccably well together, and are looking forward to growing their fishy business from the current output of 500 tonnes to 6,000 tonnes by 2020.

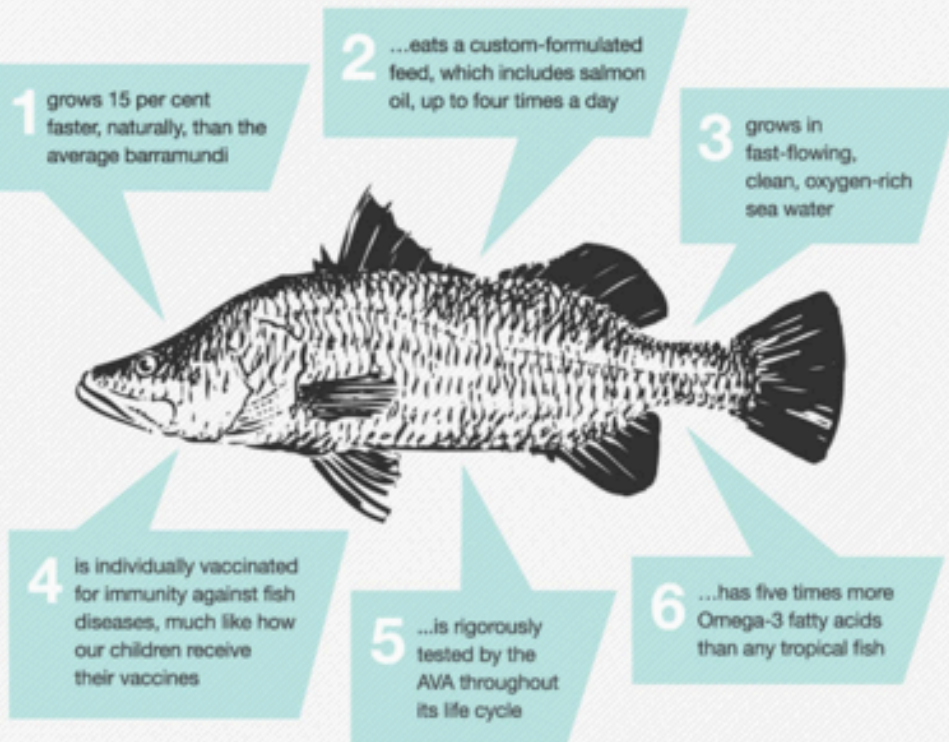
To further ensure safe-to-eat fish with a sweet and crisply clean taste, Mr Staarman is a strong proponent of technology and R&D.

Barramundi Asia's automatic feeding system ensures that food is evenly distributed, and each fish is vaccinated to build their immune systems naturally. The company has in-house labs to test for pathogens, and works with institutions and government agencies to keep fish mortality low. "We do not use growth hormones," assured Mr Andrew Kwan, the group MD of Commonwealth Capital Group, which owns the majority stake in Barramundi Asia.

Another aspect where technology has been critical for the business is the farm's carefully-developed unbroken cold chain.

Kept chilled from the moment it is hauled out of the water, filleted in a temperature-controlled environment, and finally, vacuum packed to seal out contaminants, the fish retains its fresh goodness all the way until it arrives at the customer's doorstep. "This unbroken farm-to-fork cold chain is a first in Singapore, and ensures the absolute freshness of the fish," enthused Mr Kwan.

## The super Kuhlbarra breed...



### It's fishy business

While Barramundi Asia has grown to be a foremost barramundi supplier today, Mr Staarman is quick to admit that his entrepreneurial entry was far from cushy.

Back in 2008, even the Dutchman's impeccable credentials as the ex Asia-Pacific managing director of Marine Harvest, one of the largest global fish farm operators, were not able to help him gather a pool of experts at managing hatcheries and processing fish. Even finding a plumber was tough in this part of the world.



"At that time there was no infrastructure for aquaculture in Singapore and the region. From changing nets, to cleaning cages to managing hatcheries – we couldn't get quality that was just right," said the aquaculture, microbiology and genetics graduate from the Groningen University and Wageningen University, the world's leading varsity in aquaculture sciences.



**Their superior farming techniques are environmentally friendly, so much so that a coral reef thrives a mere 200m away.**

#### **Pulling the fishy attributes under a brand name**

But he did eventually form a solid network of trustworthy professionals he could count on – plumbers included – and saw the opportunity to brand a fish.

"It's not really been done. But if you think just a little bigger, you will already leave 80 per cent of the competitors behind," said Mr Staarman.

So began the company's trek to brand its barramundi. While Mr Staarman is cognizant of the power of marketing, he is not blind to the extent of its influence. "You can market the hell out of a product but if the product itself is not good, no matter how much marketing you do, it just won't work."

Armed with a good fish, Barramundi Asia was determined to make marketing work for it. With financial assistance from IE Singapore in 2014, the company started building a brand, beginning with a name: Kühlbarra, which stands for "cool barramundi" (*kühl* being German for cool).

Said Mr Kwan: "We wanted to have our brand properly trademarked and registered from the get-go so that no one may pass off an inferior product as the real McCoy."

"Our fish have superior genetics through years of the natural-selection process. And that is the uncompromising quality that we guarantee our customers."

**"But if you think just a little bigger, you will already leave 80 per cent of the competitors behind."**

It is with this uncompromising quality that Kühlbarra barramundi has made its way into the recipes of famous chefs including Gordon Ramsay, Jamie Oliver, Willin Low and Ken Loon in Singapore.

Earlier this year, for the first time, the public gained entry into the Kühlbarra 'club', once privy only to the hotels, and restaurants via [Kühlbarra.com](http://Kühlbarra.com). At \$50 per kg, anyone in Singapore can have a premium white, harvested-to-order Kühlbarra barramundi fillet delivered to his doorstep.





## Barramundi Asia in numbers

# FISHING FOR FACTS

HOW BIG IS IT?

**7.5HA** or  
10 football fields



farm size

HOW MANY FISH?

**300,000** Total fish



HOW MUCH DO THEY EAT?

**90 TONNES**  
of feed monthly



AND GROWING STILL...

**6,000 TONNES**



GOAL by 2020

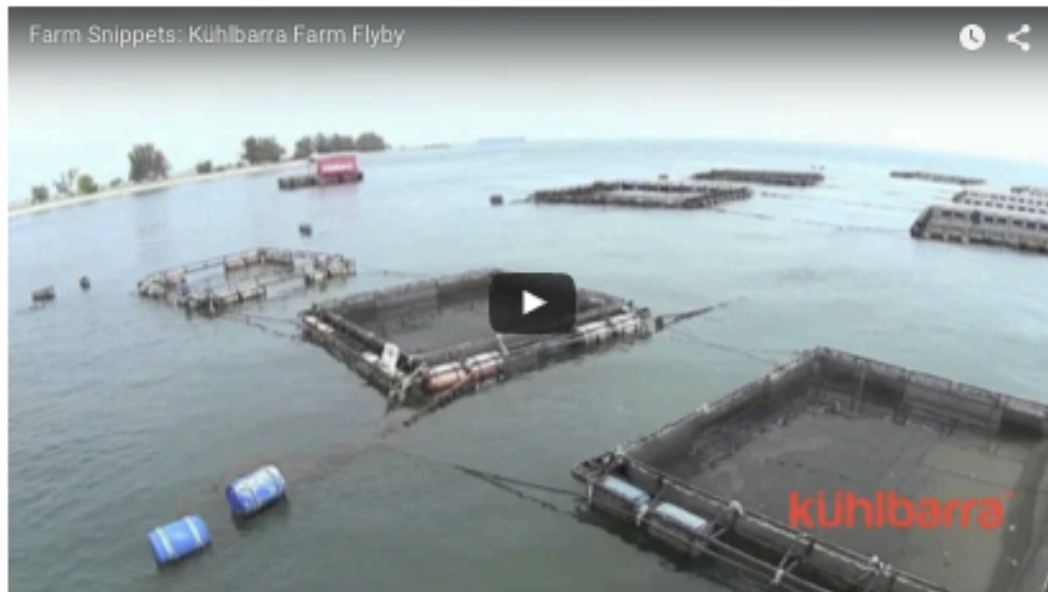
### Time to swim out to the world

With the quantity of fish caught in the wild dipping rapidly, and trends veering steeply towards sustainable fish farming, Barramundi Asia has been exporting to Australia since 2013 and more recently to the US through resellers. About 50,000 portions of filleted fish a month are air-flown to leading hotels and restaurants in Australia alone. This number makes up close to half of the farm's output.

The company has its sights set on more. Discussions with IE have thrown up a new market to break into: China. "The number of sophisticated consumers is growing in Shanghai, Beijing and Shenzhen," noted Mr Kwan. Developments, both offline and online, are underway to serve customers in the country.

Farm Snippets: Kuhlbarra Farm Flyby





*Experience Barramundi Asia from the air. Just how big is 7.5ha? Take a trip on a drone.*

With IE's intense involvement, Barramundi Asia is also racing to find suitable partners in importation and distribution, logistics solutions, and e-commerce listings and marketing.

The end in mind: To become the barramundi nexus of the world, boasting world-class management and farm sites. "We aspire to be for barramundi what Marine Harvest is to salmon," said Mr Kwan.

Its current 500 tonnes of biomass places the company among the top five barramundi farms in the world. The opening of its second farm of 12ha off the Raffles Lighthouse will push production to 6,000 tonnes by end 2020, propelling Barramundi Asia up the ranks to become the largest barramundi farm worldwide.

Now, combine that with a super fish, how can Barramundi Asia not reach its goal of promoting Kuhlbarra as Singapore's very own 'Kobe fish'?

*IE is assisting Barramundi Asia to break into China and identifying potential partners in three areas: importation and distribution, logistics solutions and e-commerce. How can we help you?*

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