



THIS PAGE AND RIGHT: The sun rises over the shrimp boats in Biloxi's small craft harbor. Shrimp, a strange creature, is easily America's favorite seafood. On average we each eat around four pounds a year.

A WILD SHRIMP CHASE

In Mississippi, the toil and triumph of shrimping has been a way of life for generations.

by boyce upholt | photography by rory doyle





JUST OFF THE MISSISSIPPI COAST, STRANGE BEASTS DWELL ON THE OCEAN FLOOR—10 LEGS, HEARTS IN THEIR HEADS, EYES PROTRUDING FROM STALKS.

But for as long as humans have lived along Mississippi's shore, they've ventured out in pursuit of this prize. Yes, the shrimp, America's favorite seafood, is an outlandish creature—and his capture demands hard work.

Though there are thousands of species of shrimp, Mississippi fishermen focus largely on two: brown and white. A few people say they prefer the latter, but to David Veal, they're both the same. "In a blind taste test you'd be hard-pressed to pick out a difference," he says. Veal knows shrimp. After 35 years of research in marine biology and agriculture, he now directs the American Shrimp Processors Association.

Born at sea, young shrimp are carried by the current into shallow estuaries along the shore. There they grow an inch each month, until the season's rains bring too much fresh water. Then shrimp ride the waves back out to sea. They live along the bottom, scouring for any food that fits in what Veal calls their "tiny little mouths." If they're lucky, they live two years. "But that's an old, old shrimp," he says.

To capture this creature, fishermen must know its murky, hidden world. The catch is best when the waters are cloudy and shrimp cannot see the nets. After a major storm, the fishing is particularly good—if you can make it on the water.

"It's all up to mother nature," Artie Desporte says. His family has owned Desporte & Sons Seafood for 120 years, and has survived plenty of storms.

He remembers Camille well. "It looked like the end of the world," he says. He'd never seen so much destruction—and then came Katrina. "We've been knocked down, we've been burned down. We worked the next day whether there was a

building there or not," he says. "My old man, he didn't believe in quitting."

That's a common sentiment in the hardscrabble world of Mississippi shrimpers. Over the years Biloxi has attracted waves of immigrants willing to seek their fortunes through sometimes dangerous work. The result is a vibrant city where Polish, Croatian, and Vietnamese cultures mix with long-standing Creole and Cajun traditions.

The work of these fishermen starts early, often well before sunrise; even on a short trip the boat might not be docked and washed till nightfall. And on bigger boats, fishermen head out for days or even weeks at a time, accompanied by just two or three compatriots and the endless roll of the sea.

Jerry Hudson isn't scared of a stingray or jellyfish.

While other fishermen sort through the bycatch with a nail-tipped dowel, lifting away such pests, Jerry reaches right in. He sorts quickly with his fingers: croakers, stingray, and puffer fish—they all go back over the side.

But for its diesel engine, this boat is little different than those that trawled the Gulf of Mexico a century ago. Once out in legal waters, its nets were dropped. The force of the water pulled apart a pair of "otter boards," which, as the fishermen dragged the nets behind the boat, held them open on the ocean floor.

Later, their contents, still squirming, were dropped on the dock. Now hungry seagulls pester the men as Jerry reaches in to separate the shrimp. Their gray armor shines in the last of the day's light. They had worried about the wind, but as darkness settles the water is calm. The streetlights and casinos glow white on the distant shore, and around them shine the spotlights of rival boats.

As they pass, Hudson tells how long each will be at sea: two days, maybe, or four. He knows these boats; he's been shrimping in Biloxi since he was a child. "If my seven-year-old was out here, he'd be running the nets with me," he says with pride.



PREVIOUS PAGE: A local shrimp boat heads into the Gulf at sunset.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Jerry Hudson prepares the nets before the trawl. The work of shrimping can be messy and wet—but it's well worth the result. As the sun sets, Hudson sorts through the bycatch. Hudson and Jerry Johnson turn on the lights to show off their catch. Shrimping can require long hours. After nightfall, Johnson, left, and Hudson, right, are still hard at work.





For most Biloxi shrimpers, the season begins in May, when Louisiana opens its waters. In June, when Mississippi declares that the majority of the year's harvest has reached legal size, they head back east. The combined seasons, white and then brown, last until February.

The first days are frenzied. "Until they run out of ice or they run out of fuel, they're not coming in," Artie Desporte says. In 2009, the Mississippi fleet caught 10 million pounds, worth over \$12 million. Even in a low-harvest year the industry yields over \$100 million of economic activity for the state, where plants process not just the Mississippi catch, but shrimp trucked in from other docks across the Gulf.

Hudson looks out to the sparkle of lights, feels the whip of salt on the wind, and can't contain himself. "That's Gulf Coast, baby!" he hollers.

His family, too, has been here, shrimping for generations. His son, he says, makes seven.

Over that time, the way people eat shrimp has changed. In the early 19th century, only locals and visiting tourists could enjoy the catch. But railroads, canning, and artificial ice expanded its reach. By 1903, Biloxi was known as the Seafood Capital of the World.

Shrimp is now the most popular American seafood—by far. Average per capita consumption hovers around four pounds a year. "It's universal," says Robert St. John, a chef, author, and restaurateur based in Hattiesburg. "Almost everyone loves shrimp." But 90 percent of the shrimp Americans eat is imported. What we have in Mississippi—wild and local—is elsewhere considered a rare and expensive treat.

"We're blessed," St. John says. "To buy shrimp off a boat, from a family of shrimpers? It's a pure Mississippi Gulf Coast experience."

Indeed, before sunrise, shoppers are clamoring along the marina's piers. Fishermen call out their catch and its price, and chefs cart away coolers by the wheelbarrow.

But this is only one small portion of Mississippi's shrimp. The larger boats catch far too much to sell pound-by-pound across the docks. Most is sent to the state's five processing plants—many of which, like so much of this industry, have been family-owned for generations.

At season's peak, a single plant can process 125,000 pounds in a day. Shrimp slide down belts and whirl through concentric shafts. They are peeled, sorted, and frozen, then packed and shipped to diners in other states.

Across town, Desporte & Sons is bustling, too. By sunrise, staff are unloading trucks and finding the "count" of that day's haul, the number of shrimp per pound. The smaller the count, the bigger the shrimp—and the higher the price.

Artie Desporte glances up from a desk strewn with paperwork. The phone is ringing constantly. His nephew and co-owner Sean Desporte explains that casinos and restaurants might call till nearly midnight, scrambling to keep their kitchens stocked. The door jingles: tourists are here to buy by the pound and to feast on the platters served in-house.

It's another busy day in shrimp.

"I started off at 10 years old," Artie says, unfazed. "I cleaned fish in the kitchen, afternoons. I've been here 53 years. This is what I do." M



PREVIOUS PAGE: After shrimp has been delivered to Desporte & Sons Seafood, Frank Mena must determine the "count" of shrimp per pound. His count will help determine the retail price.

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Fresh Gulf shrimp for sale. The crew at Desporte & Sons—Artie Desporte, Zeke Jermyn, Kathy Janico, Sean Desporte, Frank Mena, and Will Champaign—take a break from the bustle. The company has been owned by the Desporte family for over a hundred years. The café at Desporte & Sons offers fresh-cooked shrimp for visitors who'd rather not cook themselves. Some call buying fresh shrimp straight from a Biloxi fishing family a "pure Gulf Coast experience." Sean Desporte sometimes fields calls from casinos and restaurants late into the night.





Some things change, others remain the same. Except for its diesel engine, the modern shrimp boat is little different than its ancestors from a century ago.

NOW YOU'RE COOKING

Taking home some wild-caught shrimp? Follow these tips and you'll be cooking right.

DON'T LET THEM SWIM TWICE. That's a key rule of chef Cole Ellis, owner of Cleveland's Delta Meat Market. Cooking five hours from the coast, Ellis ensures his shrimp are bagged separately from the ice in which they have been packed.

DON'T TOSS YOUR SHELLS. Save them for shrimp stock, a key ingredient in New Orleans-style cooking. The shells from five pounds of whole shrimp will yield a half-gallon of stock.

DON'T OVERCOOK. "It's better to eat a shrimp a little underdone," says chef Robert St. John. Shrimp cook quickly, so they're easy to overdo. "But after a couple of times, you'll get it down pat."

ON THE TRAIL OF GOOD EATING One virtue of shrimp is the variety of ways it can be cooked: boiled, grilled, sautéed, fried—on and on. "I'd sound like Bubba from 'Forrest Gump' if I started reeling off everything you can do with shrimp," says chef Robert St. John. Ask around and you'll find chefs sourcing wild Gulf shrimp in every corner of the state.

Along the 60 miles of Mississippi coastline, you'll find the Mississippi Seafood Trail—a collection of restaurants that proudly serve not just shrimp, but all kinds of Gulf-caught fish. Last summer, the trail's first, 40 restaurants participated. Find out more at mississippiseafoodtrail.com.

YOUR OWN CHASE
The Biloxi Shrimping Trip
Hwy. 90 E. at Main St., Biloxi, 228.392.8645,
biloxishrimpingtrip.com
Offers three daily, 70-minute demonstration tours throughout the summer. While you're at the marina, find a local boat to buy your own shrimp.

The Maritime & Seafood Industry Museum
115 1st St., Biloxi, 228.435.6320, maritimemuseum.org
Landlubber seafood fans can still learn plenty, too—exhibits detailing the history, ecology, and technology of shrimping and other Gulf fisheries.



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