

Into Foggy **WATERS?**

With new legislation and a successful branding campaign, is local seafood headed for a brighter future?

In a June 2003 story Hilton Head Monthly addressed some of the challenges facing Lowcountry shrimpers and the U.S. shrimp industry at large. Shrimp boat operators throughout the Southeastern United States reeled as farm-raised shrimp from abroad flooded the U.S. market, placing negative pressure on the prices paid for their catches. Additionally, the imported shrimp raised health concerns upon the discovery that many of the foreign producers use dangerous antibiotics in the production process.

The American shrimp industry took action to restore fair competition and, perhaps more importantly, to persuade more U.S. consumers to vote with their dollars by identifying and purchasing untainted, domestic wild-caught shrimp when indulging in America's favorite seafood. Suspecting that the spike in shrimp imports was not necessarily a result of foreign producers suddenly becoming more efficient, the industry filed an antidumping petition with the Commerce Department in December of 2003. Meanwhile, seafood industry groups set out to spread the word about fresh, locally caught shrimp through marketing plans and advertising campaigns.

Has the situation improved for Lowcountry shrimpers two years later? By most accounts it is too early to tell because, although the industry did win the antidumping case, the ruling was only announced in January of this year and the prices paid to local shrimp boats won't be known until the season opens in June. Also, the ad campaigns have not been in market long enough to determine if the public is buying in. As the 2005 season approaches, the industry is looking forward hopefully to better days, but there are also some new challenges.

Is the Antidumping Ruling Enough to Save the Boats?

"The U.S. shrimp industry today won its antidumping cases, confirming that the industry has been injured over the past three years by illegally dumped shrimp imports from six countries: Brazil, China, Ecuador, India, Thailand and Vietnam," stated a January 6, 2005 press release from the Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA), an industry group uniting the shrimp fisheries of eight states including South Carolina. According to SSA, between 2000 and 2004, imports from the named countries increased by over 71% while prices fell 39% from \$5.12 to \$3.14 per pound. Data submitted to the Department of Commerce by the foreign producers showed that they were selling below their own cost of production in violation of U.S. trade laws. Based on these facts, the International Trade Commission (ITC) found that the U.S. shrimp industry did suffer injury in the amount of \$4.4 billion of economic activity as a result of illegal trade practices by the six countries named in the suit, and has imposed 17.22% duties on shrimp imports from those countries.

According to SSA spokesperson, Deborah

Long, since the ruling there has been a decline in the volume of imported shrimp coming into the United States. However, the effect on the price paid to the shrimp boats remains unclear as the prices have not been set for the '05 season and distributors are selling off inventories before purchasing new product, imported or otherwise. Asked if the ITC ruling would have a positive effect on the price of shrimp paid to the boat this year Long said, "It's too early to tell."

Barbara Hudson, owner of Hilton Head's legendary Benny Hudson Seafood, agrees that we'll have to wait until the season begins to know if local shrimpers will get a better price for their catches this year, but points out that it is not the only issue. Rising fuel costs are always a concern for shrimp boat operators and Hudson thinks that it will be a bigger issue. "I don't know if some of the boats will be able to leave the dock," she said.

Spreading the Word

"The greatest thing to come out of this," said Hudson about all of the activity aimed at preserving the U.S. shrimp industry, "is that people are asking questions." Hudson was referring

PHOTO BY BARRY KAUFMAN

to the fact that industry groups have banded together to create marketing campaigns aimed at educating the public to ask for local shrimp because it tastes better, is better for you and supports the local economy. For example, the South Carolina Seafood Alliance, founded in 2000 to provide a unified marketing voice for South Carolina seafood, created a TV and radio advertising campaign last year called "Fresh Local." Hudson said that customers come into her seafood store inquiring about local product after having seen or heard the commercials.

On a broader scale, Wild American Shrimp, Inc. (WASI), a non-profit corporation formed by the Southern Shrimp Alliance, launched a national marketing campaign in 2004 to educate consumers nationwide about the nutritional and economic benefits of wild-caught American shrimp. The campaign's objective is to create brand equity for fresh American shrimp similar to that of Certified Angus Beef, Vidalia Onions or Idaho Potatoes.

An important part of WASI's message is

built around the health and nutritional advantages of wild-caught American shrimp over the farm-raised imports. For example, many seafood-exporting countries allow the use of certain chemicals, banned by the United States, in the production of farm-raised seafood. One of those chemicals is the antibiotic chloramphenicol, which has been linked to cancer and gray baby syndrome in humans. As recently as last September, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) found residues of chloramphenicol in a shrimp shipment from Vietnam. Since only 1 to 2 percent of imported seafood is inspected by the FDA, consumers are at great risk of exposure to harmful additives.

"We want to inform American consumers so they can make educated decisions about the seafood they're eating," said WASI president Elaine Knight. In conjunction with federal "Country of Origin Labeling" (COOL) requirements, which went into effect on April 4, WASI's branding efforts will help consumers make informed choices. The U.S. shrimp industry is

betting that seafood lovers will choose safety and health regardless of any price differences.

Local Outlook

There is another factor, a long-term trend that has nothing to do with fuel costs, unfair trade practices or dangerous chemicals, that may have the greatest impact on the future of the local shrimp industry. Hilton Head Island's emergence from a quiet vacation resort to a thriving full-time community is partly responsible for a concurrent decline in the shrimp population around the Island. Waterfront land development and increased watercraft traffic have encroached on shrimp habitats over the years, so we may never see the number of shrimp boats trolling Hilton Head's waters that many of us remember in years gone by regardless of what happens with foreign competition and other market factors. It is simply a fact of the changing times. Nevertheless, as long as there are shrimp in the water there are plenty of reasons to preserve such a rich part of Lowcountry heritage. — Frank Dunne, Jr.

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Shrimp preparation tips

- Wash shrimp and pat dry with a paper towel.
- Shrimp can be cooked with heads and shells on, or peeled. Cooking shrimp in their shells seals in flavor and juices, but then they must be peeled by diners at the table, a messy job you may want to avoid. If you prefer to cook them peeled, twist off the heads, then, running your finger along the abdomen, lift off the shells.
- Shrimp have edible sand veins, actually digestive sacs, that run along their backs. Most smaller shrimp are only peeled, but larger shrimp look more attractive deveined. If you wish to devein a peeled shrimp, run a sharp knife along the vein, then rinse under cold water to remove the vein and any grit. To devein a shrimp with the shell on, cut through the shell along the vein, then lift the

vein out with a toothpick.

- Brining shrimp removes excess water and gives shrimp a crunchy texture. To brine shrimp, dissolve salt and sugar in hot water. Add a tray of ice cubes and stir. Place shrimp in the cold solution and soak 30 minutes for peeled shrimp, or 60 minutes for shrimp with shells on.
- Shrimp cook very quickly and toughen with heat. The secret to successful shrimp cookery is to not overcook them. Cook shrimp at the last minute and serve them hot.
- Pan frying: Rinse shrimp and pat dry. Heat a frying pan until hot and add oil. Add shrimp, making sure they are not crowded in the pan, and fry, turning occasionally, for 4 to 8 minutes, depending on size. Shrimp are done when opaque in the center.
- Deep frying: Pour oil into a wok or deep fryer; at least 1-1/2 inches (about 3.8cm) deep, and the cooker should be less than half full of oil. Heat oil to 375°F (190°C), using a thermometer to monitor temperature. Dip peeled shrimp in batter, drain, then slip them into hot oil. Cook until brown, 2 to 3 minutes.
- Simmering: Pour enough cooking liquid (water or broth and herbs and spices) in pan to cover shrimp. Bring to boil, add shrimp, and reduce heat. Simmer shrimp until opaque in the center, 3 to 6 minutes, depending on size and whether or not they have been peeled.
- Grilling: For small shrimp, string on a skewer and place 4 inches (about 10cm) above prepared hot coals or fire. Cook until opaque and moist inside, 3 to 4 minutes.
- Broiling: Place aluminum foil on baking pan and spread shrimp on top. Place 4 inches (about 10cm) from heat and broil 2 minutes on each side.



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