

# Shrimp Country

Recipes and Tales  
from the Southern Coasts

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marine species, and equipping themselves with GPS systems, but in their essences, the boats, the business, and the crews are much as they were a hundred years ago.

I spoke with captains in each of the coastal states—a feat in itself, according to some, given their generally cautious and sometimes cantankerous ranks. I met a few who, based on first impressions, honestly might have given me a scare on a lonely street, but I found them universally friendly and engaging. The nature of their physical work, and the tender ages at which they begin in the business—generally forcing them to forgo most conventional education—can present a pretty rough exterior, but they’re epic storytellers and incredibly hardworking men. Their omens, their recipes, their tattoos, their scars, the descriptions of strange items hauled up along with the shrimp, the storms they’ve survived—these mariners straddle the ancient and modern worlds.

Of course the trawlers aren’t the only way to pull shrimp to shore. Folks cast nets from their Georgia docks, with their boots ankle deep in South Carolina’s pluff mud creeks, or from their skiffs a little farther out into bays in Texas. Along Alabama’s Point Clear coast, the shrimp might come to you as they swim to shore in the middle of a summer night during a “jubilee” event (for more on this, see page 64). A good haul is shared with the neighbors and cooked up using recipes immortalized on stained index cards, rumpled loose-leaf sheets, and in the closely guarded mental files of some of the South’s culinary artists—whether James Beard Award–winning chefs or someone’s beloved grandmother.



*Shrimp Country* is my way of honoring the shrimping communities through the joy of their soul-fueling foods and stories. It’s a portrait of southern coastal America through a culinary lens. Kick off your shoes, roll up your sleeves, and dig in!

Cast net shrimping along Church Creek’s mud banks, Wadmalaw Island, South Carolina.

# The Ten Commandments of Shrimp

*(Casting aside Leviticus 11:9–12)*

- 1** Thou shalt purchase wild American shrimp when it's available.
- 2** Thou shalt honor thy shrimp fishermen, who risk their lives bringing the delicacy to shore.
- 3** Thou shalt not throw away shrimp shells but shall make and freeze shrimp stock for future recipes.
- 4** Thou shalt not overcook thy shrimp until it becomes a flavorless piece of rubber.
- 5** Thou shalt not throw away leftover steamed shrimp but shall make any of the scores of recipes that showcase it (within a day or so).
- 6** Thou shalt delight in down-home regional shrimp dishes including bog, mull, perloo, and gumbo.
- 7** Thou shalt not demean shrimp with thy poorly made grits or drown them in flavorless sauces.
- 8** Thou shalt share thy bounty with friends and neighbors when thou catchest more than a teaser haul off thy dock.
- 9** Thou shalt not turn thy nose up at frozen shrimp but shall understand that most trawlers freeze shrimp immediately after catching them to keep them fresh.
- 10** Thou shalt bow down and thank the Lord for shrimp fresh off the boat in all its jewel-toned goodness.

Grace Chapel, Rockville, South Carolina.

## Fried Shrimp

Lots of coastal folks say their favorite way to eat shrimp is fried without a lot of fuss, just a quick dredge through cornmeal or flour, nothing that takes too much away from the flavor of the shrimp itself. But even a cooking method that seems like a no brainer has old pro tips. I learned some of these by *not* minding my own business while communing with tomato pie at Stono Market on Johns Island in South Carolina; my ears pivoted toward a conversation about a recent cast net catch off a private dock. I followed up with my table neighbor, Michael Peterson, to add some of the following suggestions to my growing collection. As a lifelong Lowcountry resident, he knows his shrimp.

### TIPS

- ❖ Bears repeating: Guests will eat between  $\frac{1}{2}$  and 1 pound of fried shrimp each unless they're being passed rather than served while seated, in which case they're likely to eat less.
- ❖ Use oils with a high smoke point and a neutral flavor. Your best bets are canola, safflower, and peanut, but peanut oil has a deeper flavor—and if you're cooking for a crowd you will want to avoid it because of allergies.
- ❖ Keep the shrimp—and its batter or dredging ingredients—in the freezer for an hour before you fry them.
- ❖ For more kick, before they coat the shrimp, some people marinate them for an hour in a combination of Worcestershire, soy, and hot sauces and Italian dressing, or whatever floats your boat. This way the flavor comes from the shrimp rather than a sauce you dip them into.
- ❖ Some people dress up their cornmeal crust with dashes of garlic and onion powders and lemon pepper seasoning.
- ❖ If you batter your shrimp, dredge them in flour first, shaking excess free, then dip in an egg and buttermilk mixture (maybe with a splash of hot sauce or a little mustard), and dredge in the cornmeal. Some will tell you not to use egg or water before dredging the shrimp in flour, fish fry mix, or what have you—that the shrimp are lighter without the binder.



Gerald's Pig and Shrimp gives a nod to the trawling heritage of Tybee Island, Georgia. The metal shrimp is formed from forks and spoons.

- ❖ Shake excess cornmeal or flour free by tossing the shrimp in a colander or mesh sieve. A “breeding box” or basket can also be used.
- ❖ Pour oil 3 inches deep into a Dutch oven or other deep-sided pot, if not using a deep fryer.
- ❖ Various coastal experts list the ideal temperature range for deep frying between 325 and 375°F. The oil is ready when you sprinkle a pinch of flour on top and it sizzles on contact. Basically, the higher the temperature the less oil that will saturate the batter. Dredged but not battered shrimp may do better at the lower temperature.
- ❖ Fry shrimp in small batches; don't crowd them in a pan or deep fryer basket.
- ❖ As soon as the shrimp float to the top, lift them out with a slotted spoon or sieve. Drain on paper towels or old paper grocery bags.
- ❖ If you plan to use the oil a second time, strain it through a coffee filter once it's cooled and keep it sealed in the refrigerator. A third use is not recommended.



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### Shrimp Cocktail Dips

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I can't tell you how many coastal (and inland) restaurants I've been to over the past few years; I've visited forty-five of the states, including every one with a coastline, and more than one hundred islands. So I've seen a lot of menus, and I remain puzzled by how shrimp cocktail is trapped in this midcentury presentation of bland shrimp paired with the traditional ketchup and horseradish sauce. I thought it would be fun to take a look at shrimp dips in a different way—to gather the many accompaniment sauces I've encountered, whether drizzled, pooled, or dolloped, to offer tasty alternatives to the tomato sauce. Of course I still love regular ol' cocktail sauce—it's just time it had some competition. So whether you've fried, steamed, or grilled up a batch of shrimp, here are some ways to liven things up.

Loblolly pine catkins along Boneyard Beach, Ossabaw Island, Georgia.



# Pickled Shrimp

Chef Fred Neville, Fat Hen | Johns Island, South Carolina

Fat Hen's menu is rich with delicious concoctions, but this recipe comes from Chef Neville's grandmother, Jewel Kizzia of Tryon, North Carolina. Make it ahead of time—it's best if it sits for a day or two.

**Serves 6**

## INGREDIENTS

1 large onion, diced	1 teaspoon mustard seeds
1 stalk celery, sliced	½ cup sugar
1 medium carrot, diced	1 cup cider vinegar
½ jalapeño pepper, seeds scraped out, sliced into thin rings	1 cup tarragon vinegar
1 small bulb fennel, diced	4 ounces French green beans, cut into ½-inch pieces
1 tablespoon kosher salt	1 pound (21- to 25-count) shrimp, peeled and deveined
Grated zest and juice of 1 large lemon	Grilled bread
Grated zest and juice of 1 orange	A few small heirloom tomatoes, sliced
5 cloves garlic, peeled	1 cucumber, sliced
1 bay leaf	Rémoulade (see recipe, page 31)
1 tablespoon whole black peppercorns	
1 teaspoon ground coriander	

## PROCESS

- 1 Put everything in a pot except the shrimp, bread, tomatoes, cucumbers, and rémoulade. Bring to a boil and cook for 3 minutes.
- 2 Put the shrimp in a heatproof container. Pour the boiling liquid over the shrimp and stir well.
- 3 Transfer to a sealed plastic or glass container. Let sit overnight (or longer), shaking it occasionally to make sure the flavors distribute.
- 4 Serve with grilled bread, tomatoes, cucumbers, and rémoulade.

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# Sometimes the Shrimp Come to You

## The Maritime Mystery of Mobile Bay's Jubilee Events

On steamy summer nights along Mobile Bay's coast, when fresh water swirls with the salty Gulf of Mexico and winds press down just so, sea creatures come ashore in droves of their own volition: slithering eels, flapping flounder, crawling shrimp, and scrambling crabs. So many beach themselves that folks spread the word to their sleeping neighbors, ringing bells along the waterfront back in the day, and through phone calls in this more recent era. They come armed with buckets, nets, bushel baskets, and gigs to haul in the free catch that's known as a jubilee. It happens every summer, sometimes more than once, usually in August just before dawn—but all of the timing and the right conditions can be present without the same effect. This fable-worthy exodus has been scarcely recorded elsewhere in the world, but it's only here along a short stretch of Alabama's eastern coast between Daphne and Point Clear that it's a reliable annual ritual.

Part of the magic is that even in this advanced technological age, the



occurrence remains unpredictable. Texas Sea Grant agent Tony Reisinger, whose mother hailed from Mobile, helps to explain by referencing Edwin May's 1930s studies—but also admits no one really knows for sure how jubilees come to be. “Estuaries have a dense saltwater wedge that slips like a long tongue reaching from the ocean’s side underneath the less dense, fresher bay water. Jubilees can occur when that bottom water, oxygen deprived from decaying organic matter, is pushed onto the shallow eastern shelf of the bay. The incoming tide sometimes coaxes the low-oxygen—hypoxic—water toward the shallows, driving marine life to seek refuge along the eastern shoreline, where in early morning, already low levels of oxygen are being consumed, not produced, by algae in the water. This doesn’t explain everything, because the result is not always a jubilee. It could be that the easterly wind that’s usually present is another factor in the equation, and that adds to the enigma. Ultimately, I’ve always thought of jubilee as one of the mysteries of life I simply have to accept without question, having those bay waters in my veins.”

With a home smack on the water, Point Clear resident Ralph Reynolds has experienced a number of jubilees.

He describes the atmosphere preceding the event as dead still and humid.

One recent summer morning, he was heading out to the Gulf around 6:30 a.m. when he heard a commotion and saw gulls and herons swooping down and crowding his pier. From his porch, he could make out some boats and people with flounder gigs and nets. Walking down to the beach, he saw the shrimp, crabs, and flounder piling up, and soon learned how determined the creatures were: “A gull dropped an eel on my head; I threw it back in the water, only to see it shimmy right back onto shore.” He scooped up all the shrimp he could for an impromptu feast that night.

Sometimes the jubilee forces more of one kind of creature than another out of Mobile Bay; on one occasion, Ralph said, the sand was so filled with eels buried up to their necks, all of them gasping for air, that it was hard to walk without stepping on one. “It was like the sand had sprouted Medusa heads.” ❀

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## True Blue

Captain Charlie Livingston, the *Babe*, Aransas Pass, Texas, and Fort Myers, Florida

You might take one look at the guy wandering around the Erickson & Jensen dock with rough bare feet sporting a soiled, ragged T-shirt and long, wild hair pulled back from his weathered face and wonder what the cat dragged in. You might struggle to understand his accent. Your gut instinct might even scoot you across the street to avoid him. But if you judged this particular book by his frayed, stained cover and use of language, you'd miss meeting one of the most successful shrimp trawler captains in the Gulf of Mexico, and a big-hearted hero to boot. Charlie Livingston is the gen-u-ine, salty article.

I was introduced to Charlie by one of the Aransas Pass fleet owners, Grant Erickson. Charlie had just filled the hold of the *Babe* with thirty thousand pounds of shrimp during a twenty-four-day trip out at sea (which explains the state of him—three weeks on an old trawler with two other guys—his wife, Judy, says she has to throw his “ripped up, ripped off” clothes away when he isn't looking). That's a tractor trailer's load of shrimp, in case you're

wondering, and at that day's price per pound, a haul worth about \$200,000 at market.

The shrimp tattoos across Charlie's shoulders are a testament to his pride, dedication to his work, and deep roots in the coastal life. His vision for the full-back inked tableaux includes Poseidon with a trident in his raised arm ready to “gig” the shrimp. Charlie as a Gulf Coast god isn't that much of a stretch, from the curly hair and beard to the role as protector. He learned to swim at five when his daddy tossed him overboard—with a rope—and has been in and on the water ever since. He's the kind of sailor who jumps on another captain's burning boat when everyone else is jumping off, with his head wrapped in a wet towel to breathe while he sees how he can put out the fire below and save the vessel.

Charlie's worked in the business for more than three decades and is respected as one of those captains who instinctively knows where the shrimp are beyond the previous years' reports and equipment that guides the



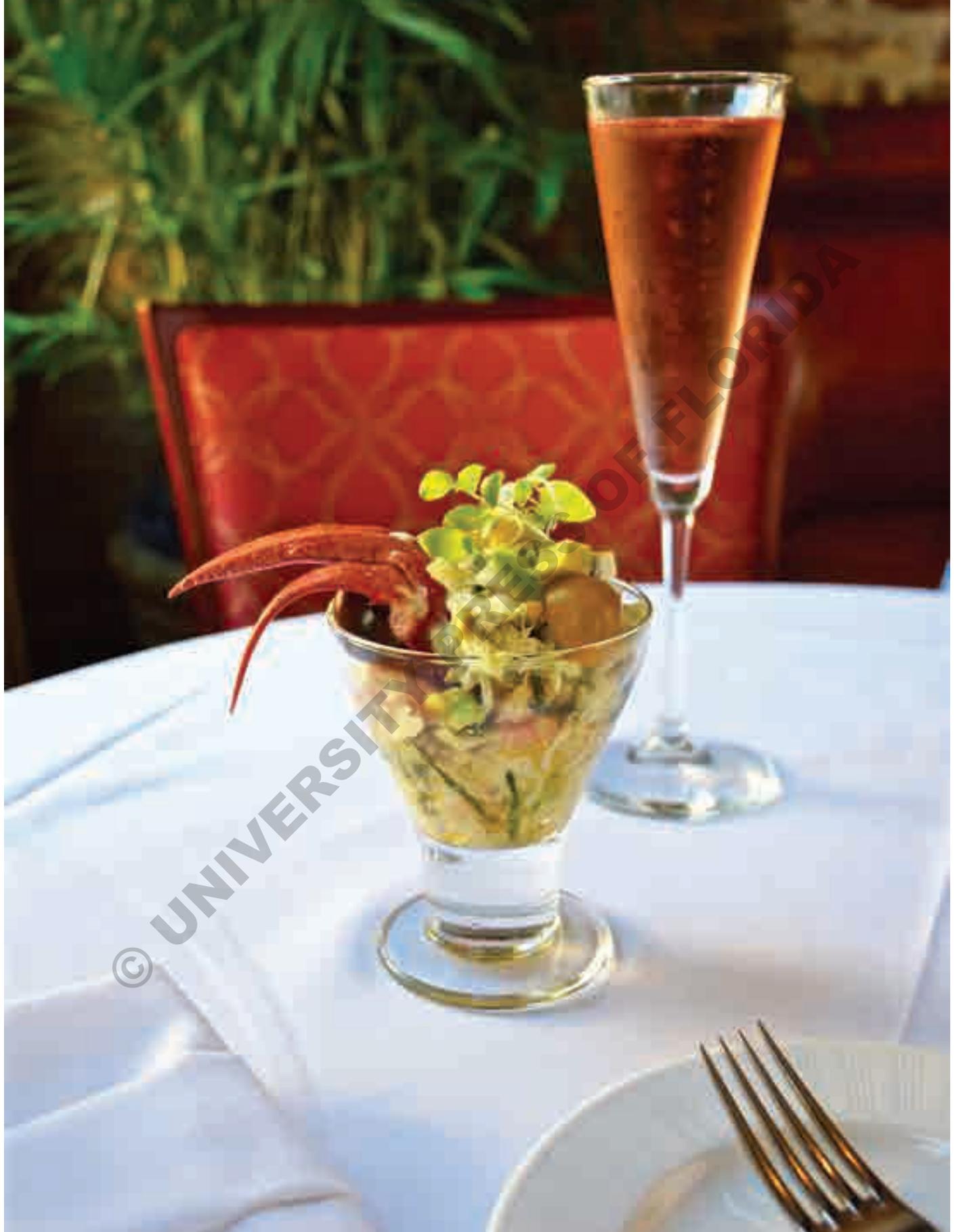
competition. As Judy says, “He’ll go where most people won’t—he’ll fight trash on the ocean floor in the shipping lanes, risking tearing up his nets, because the shrimp are all tucked up underneath all over the place in there. He’ll stay up for twelve hours fixing the

nets to start again, and whatever trash he brings up from the water, he recycles when he gets back to shore.” Charlie’s worked for Erickson & Jensen for so long, so loyally and so well, that he’s become a member of the family. He’s as true blue as the ink on his skin. ❀



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# Seafood Cocktail

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Chef Shawn Kelly, High Cotton | Charleston, South Carolina

A tangy, textured take on seafood salad that's as pretty as it is delicious.

**Serves 4**

## INGREDIENTS

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ½ cup fresh lemon juice (or combination of other citrus juices such as blood orange or grapefruit) | 8 ounces crabmeat, picked over to remove any shells                            |
| ¼ cup diced shallots   | 4 ounces cooked lobster meat   |
| 1 teaspoon salt  | 1 avocado, coarsely diced  |
| 1 tablespoon sugar   | 1 tablespoon toasted pine nuts   |
| ½ teaspoon white pepper  | 3 tablespoons chopped fresh basil (or other herbs such as parsley or tarragon) |
| 1 cup olive oil  |  |
| 8 large poached or boiled deveined and shelled shrimp, cut in half lengthwise                      |  |

## PROCESS

- 1** Stir together, in this order, the lemon juice, shallots, 1 teaspoon salt, the sugar, pepper, and oil. There will be some extra, but this vinaigrette stores well in the refrigerator and can be used as a dressing or a marinade.
- 2** In a bowl, toss together the seafood, avocado, pine nuts, basil, and salt to taste with enough of the dressing to coat. Taste, and add more vinaigrette if needed. Serve immediately.

*Overleaf:* Cotton bolls and pod near Darlington, South Carolina.

# Shrimp and Grits

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Pinkney Venning Mikell, Peters Point Plantation | Edisto Island, South Carolina

The Mikells are an honored Edisto Island family whose blood pulses with the ebb and flow of the tidal creeks. Mikells began planting in this soil in the 1600s, and they've been doing so ever since—and on this specific stretch of land along St. Pierre's Creek since 1715. I wasn't surprised when Pinkney offered a shrimp and grits recipe when I asked if he might contribute his tastebuds' wisdom to this collection—what could be more true to his island? In his words, this is a “pantry” dish that's “close to the ground”—uncomplicated and pulled together from ingredients commonly on hand. Shrimp and grits are eaten for breakfast, lunch, and dinner along the southern coasts.

**Serves 2 to 4**

## INGREDIENTS

1 cup good-quality grits	¼ cup minced onion
1 cup shrimp stock or water	2 pounds small raw shrimp, peeled (creek shrimp are best but are hard to find)
Salt to taste	¼ cup ketchup
1 cup milk	Worcestershire sauce
Slosh of whipping cream	Hot sauce or cayenne pepper, if desired
½ to 1 pound thick, not-too-smoky bacon	4 tablespoons butter
2 to 3 cloves garlic, minced	

## PROCESS

**1** In a heavy saucepan, bring the grits, stock, salt, and milk to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer for 20 minutes. (Grits can be cooked longer, if desired; they become more tender.) Stir in the cream and continue to cook the grits slowly, stirring often, for about 10 minutes.

**2** In a skillet, fry the bacon until crisp. Remove the bacon to paper towels to drain, decanting the grease into a heatproof container but leaving several tablespoons of the grease in the pan with all the brown crunchy bits.

**3** Set the pan over low heat and add the garlic and onion. Cook until they sweat and are soft but not fried.

- 4** Increase the heat to medium and add the shrimp; cook quickly, turning the shrimp as needed for even heating, but do not cook through—cook just until the shrimp start to take on a pink shade throughout. You will still see some uncooked shrimp.
- 5** As the pink starts to predominate, add the ketchup and stir to coat shrimp. Add a few dashes of Worcestershire sauce and hot sauce as desired. Salt and freshly ground black pepper can also be added to taste.
- 6** Continue to cook for another minute, until the shrimp are just cooked through. Remove from the heat and stir in the cold butter, which makes everything glossy and smooth.
- 7** Spoon the grits into a serving dish or individual dishes, then spoon the shrimp over the top. Crumble the bacon on top and serve.



Scott Dantzler's vintage washing machine tub serves as a fire pit for a winter party at Peters Point Plantation on Edisto Island, South Carolina.

# Shrimp Mull

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Judge E. C. Butts | Blythe Island, Georgia

From the Cassina Garden Club's 1937 edition of *Coastal Cookery*

Mull is an heirloom northern Georgia recipe, standing shoulder to shoulder with other regional dishes including Brunswick stew; the Lowcountry's bog, perloo, and Frogmore stew; North Carolina's muddle; and Louisiana's gumbo, Creole, and jambalaya. Mull is usually a cream stew, but this version is for a tomato broth—still thickened with cracker crumbs, as is traditional. The Cassina Garden Club on St. Simons Island has been keeping such culinary and other Sea Isle traditions vibrantly alive through their stewardship and preservation efforts since 1928.

**Serves 10**

## INGREDIENTS

- |                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| 2 (14½-ounce) cans diced tomatoes | 2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce   |
| 1 (10¾-ounce) can tomato soup     | ¼ teaspoon ground allspice   |
| 1 lemon, sliced                   | ¼ teaspoon curry powder  |
| 2 cloves garlic, sliced           | 5 pounds shrimp, peeled and deveined                                       |
| 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, divided  | 1 cup dry sherry   |
| 2 cups diced bacon                | 1 sleeve saltines or other mildly flavored<br>and salted crackers, crushed |
| 1 cup chopped onion               | Hot cooked rice  |
| 1 cup chopped celery              | Pickles  |
| 1 teaspoon celery seed            | Rye bread  |
| 15 drops hot sauce                |  |
| 1 (14-ounce) bottle of ketchup    |  |

## PROCESS

**1** In a heavy stew pot, combine 2 quarts water, the tomatoes, tomato soup, lemon, and garlic.

**2** Melt ½ cup of butter in a frying pan; add the bacon and onion and cook until the bacon is crisp and the onion is browned, about 10 minutes, then add to the stew pot.

- 3 Add the celery, celery seed, hot sauce, ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, allspice, and curry powder. Bring to a boil and simmer for 2 hours.
- 4 Add the shrimp; simmer for 1 hour.
- 5 Add ½ cup of butter, the sherry, and cracker crumbs and heat through.
- 6 Serve over rice in bowls, with pickles and rye bread.

## Shrimp, Sausage, and Wild Rice Bog

Barbara Ambrose, Stono Market & Tomato Shed Café | Johns Island, South Carolina

Bog is an aptly named juicy Lowcountry rice casserole; chicken can be substituted for the shrimp, with sautéed sliced mushrooms added.

Serves 4

### INGREDIENTS

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 6-ounce box mixed long-grain and wild rice      | ¼ cup diced sweet onion (Vidalia or Walla Walla)                 |
| 1½ cups Shrimp Stock (see recipe, page 25)      | 1 tablespoon chopped garlic                                      |
| 1 cup smoked sausage cut into bite-sized pieces | Butter for sautéing  |
| ¼ cup diced celery                              | 2 pounds shrimp, shelled, deveined, and cut into pieces if large |

### PROCESS

- 1 Cook the rice according to the directions on the box, but replacing half of the water with shrimp stock.
- 2 In a sauté pan over medium heat, cook the sausage, celery, onion, and garlic in butter, stirring frequently, until the onion is translucent, 7 to 10 minutes. Add the shrimp and cook until heated through. Add the sausage, shrimp, and vegetable mixture to the cooked rice and toss to combine. Serve hot.