

COASTAL GEORGIA SEAFOOD

HOW CRD HELPS BRING YOUR COASTAL FAVORITES
FROM THE OCEAN TO YOUR TABLE

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Georgia's stunning coastline boasts not only breathtaking views and serene beaches, but also a diverse array of seafood that captivates the hearts and palates of locals and visitors alike.

Among the treasures of the Georgia coast, three favorites stand out: blue crabs, shrimp, and oysters. These foods play an important role in the recreational and commercial significance of coastal Georgia culture, and are exceptional foods that have made them staples in the region's culinary scene.

Bountiful Harvests and Sustainable Management

The Georgia coast offers a haven for recreational fishers and seafood enthusiasts who love the thrill of catching their own seafood treasures. Catching blue

crabs, seining the beaches for shrimp and picking oysters are time-honored traditions for many coastal residents, fostering a deep connection to the local environment and its bountiful offerings.

Dr. Carolyn Belcher, chief of CRD's Marine Fisheries Section, said the coast offers a wide variety of the recreational and commercial fishing opportunities.

"The estuaries along Georgia's coast are thriving ecosystems, serving as nurseries and habitats for various marine species," she said. "Blue crabs, shrimp, and oysters are not only important economically, but also provide recreational opportunities for people to connect with nature and engage in sustainable harvesting practices. At CRD, we conduct a variety of surveys that help us to better understand the local fisheries, and what we can do



Tyler Jones/CRD

Fresh wild Georgia shrimp are poured from a steamer basket during a low country boil June 22.

to conserve them for future generations and ensure the sustainability of our resources."

Shrimp season, for example, is opened and closed using data from CRD's Ecological Monitoring Trawl Survey (EMTS). This survey is one of the longest uninterrupted and ongoing fishery-independent surveys on the Eastern U.S. coast. The EMTS is performed monthly using an otter trawl configured with a 40-foot net towed behind the Research Vessel *Reid W Harris*.

Six of Georgia's commercially important estuarine sound systems are sampled each month: Wassaw, Ossabaw, Sapelo, St. Simons, St. Andrew and Cumberland. Monthly catch-per-unit-of-effort values are compared with historical database averages to evaluate stock status and abundance and to prepare administrative fishery management recommendations for recreationally and commercially important species.

"Anyone that loves wild Georgia shrimp has a connection to this survey," Belcher said. "It's through the data gathered aboard the Harris that we can continue to successfully manage this important commercial fishery."

Likewise, these tasty crustaceans are a favorite for recreational beach seiners, who pull nets up and down the coast's beaches every summer. Setting recreational limits on how much seafood any one person or group can harvest helps ensure these activities will be enjoyed for decades to come.

"By implementing measures such as size limits, seasonal closures, and habitat restoration, we can safeguard the populations of blue crabs, shrimp, and oysters, ensuring their availability for future generations to enjoy," Belcher said. "It is crucial to strike a balance between interests and the conservation of these invaluable resources."

Commercial Importance and Economic Impact

Beyond recreation, the seafood industry along the Georgia coast plays a vital role in the local economy, supporting numerous jobs and contributing to the region's economy. In 2022, shrimp and blue crab harvests in Georgia accounted for a dockside value of more than \$16 million, according to landings reported to CRD. These delicious treats are highly sought-after commodities, finding their way from the coastal waters to the tables of homes and restaurants throughout the low country and beyond.

Chef Tim Lensch, executive chef of Georgia Sea Grill on St. Simons Island, shared his perspective on the value of Georgia's seafood: "We have some of the best seafood on the Atlantic Coast here in Georgia," he said. "The white shrimp from Georgia are some of the sweetest you'll taste. Right now, our corn-fried shrimp are selling like crazy. I think when people look to Coastal Georgia, one of their initial thoughts is shrimp. It's always popular, especially our shrimp and grits."

Keeping Seafood Safe

The allure of Georgia's seafood is undeniable. Blue crabs, shrimp, and oysters are culinary staples, enriching traditional dishes and inspiring innovative creations that showcase the region's unique flavors.

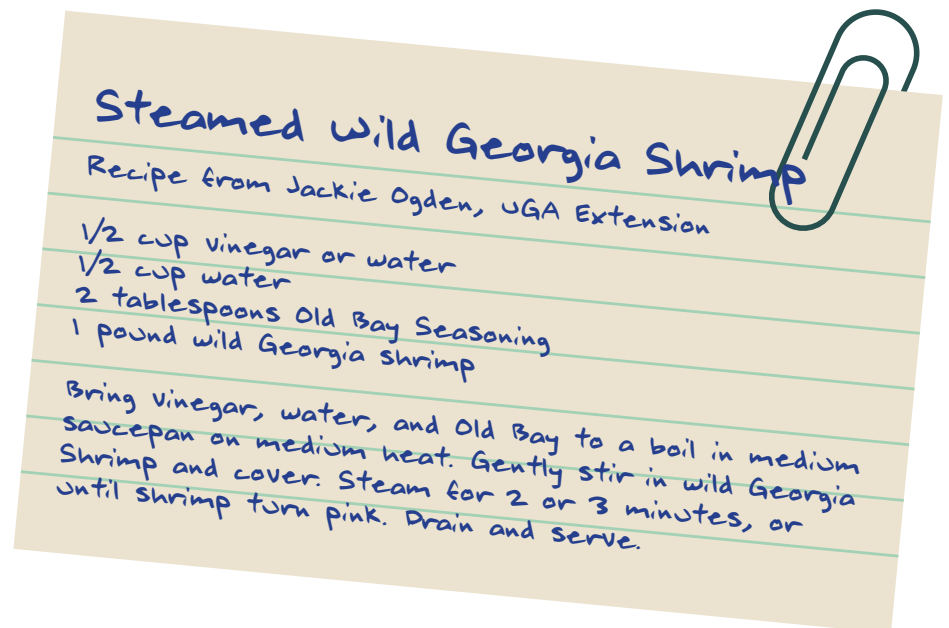
Perhaps one of the most highly prized seafoods from the Georgia coast are its blade-shaped, hand-harvested oysters. Described by many as the tastiest oysters around, they are used in backyard oyster roasts, chowders and stews, and eaten raw or steamed. Keeping these bivalves safe to consumers is at the forefront of CRD's Shellfish Sanitation Plan. CRD's Shellfish and Water Quality Unit monitors shellfish harvest areas, ensuring potentially dangerous bacteria levels stay below unacceptable levels.

"We monitor 82 water quality sites per month," said Dominic Guadagnoli, the unit's leader. "Our program is administered under the guidance of the Food and Drug Administration, and in conjunction with the Georgia Department of Agriculture."

Commercial shellfish harvesters are required to go through an education program at CRD, which recently expanded to offer a self-paced interactive course proctored at CRD. The new training is offered in English, and for the first time, now in Spanish. The three-module course was put together by CRD Marine Biologist Michael Mock, who also works in the Shellfish and Water Quality Unit.

"We saw a need to make sure Georgia shellfish harvesters are getting the most up-to-date, thorough training available," he said. "We had an existing training program, but this new version offers a more interactive approach, aimed at helping harvesters learn lasting and valuable information that can help keep themselves and the public safe."

The training includes information on safe harvest practices, time and temperature regulations, contamination prevention, and state and federal rules that govern shellfish harvest.



Star of the Show: Blue Crabs

One of the most iconic stars of the Georgia seafood scene, though, is undoubtedly the blue crab.

These hard-shelled marine animals are named for their bright blue claws, and are abundant in coastal Georgia rivers, creeks, sounds, and nearshore waters. An active swimmer, with its last pair of legs flattened like small paddles, its scientific name is *Callinectes sapidus*, meaning "beautiful swimmer."

Blue crabs can be found from New Jersey to Florida on the Atlantic coast, and along the Gulf coast to Texas. These crabs feed on most plant and animal matter available to them. During winter months, cooler water temperatures send them into semi-hibernation. However, they are available to fisherman year-round.

Blue crabs have a lifespan of about two to three years on average. Females can carry 700,000 to 2 million eggs on the abdomen for about two weeks until the eggs hatch.

When a blue crab outgrows its hard shell, it sheds that shell by backing out of it. After "molting," the new soft shell that was beneath the hard outer shell will begin to harden. Blue crabs are frequently harvested during this stage, which lasts just a few hours. These soft-shell crabs provide excellent eating without the trouble of picking the shell.

In Georgia, the commercial blue crab harvest is the second most

important seafood industry after shrimp, bringing crab fishermen an average of \$4.78 million annually. Georgia laws are very encouraging for the sport crabber. Unless otherwise designated, the saltwaters of Georgia are open year-round for recreational crabbing at any time of day.

'Why wouldn't you?'

The seafood treasures found along the Georgia coast represent more than just a delicious meal—they embody the unique connection between the region's people and its rich marine ecosystems. The recreational joy, commercial importance, and exceptional food value of these seafoods cannot be overstated.

Blue crabs, shrimp, and oysters hold a special place in the hearts and palates of Georgians and visitors alike. From the thrill of catching blue crabs and the joy of shrimp festivals to the culinary traditions surrounding oysters, the bounty of the Georgia coast continues to be a source of pride and sustenance. Whether you are a seafood lover, an angler, or a connoisseur of coastal cuisine, Georgia's seafood offerings are a true delight to be savored and celebrated.

Chef Lensch of Georgia Sea Grill summed it up: "My love for Southern cooking is connected to the low country," he said. "With all the incredible ingredients we have here, why wouldn't you use them?" 🍷