

The Life of a Key West pink shrimp...from the deep to dinner

The sparkling blue waters surrounding the Florida Keys hold all sorts of treasure. One of which has found it's way to virtually every menu up and down the island chain. Key west pink shrimp or just Key West pinks as they are often called are a huge commodity here in the Keys. And with good reason, they are plentiful and tasty. The shrimp that come out of our waters are actually pink in color. In fact they give the appearance of cooked shrimp but don't be fooled.

I stumbled across a story on floridakeysnew.com about Key West's shrimp boats in the 80's. It seems that during the Mariel Boat Lift, some of the shrimpers used shrimp boats to bring Cubans onto American soil. With a value of up to \$1000.00/head the Cubans were just as profitable as shrimp, maybe even more. After it was determined that the Cubans being "saved" were not the most savory individuals, the States put an end to the mission. The shrimpers however were making pretty good money and kept it up. Unfortunately it didn't end well for a lot of the shrimp boats as the US government seized them. Eventually they got their boats back and now they just catch shrimp and lots of it..



Trawlers in port on Stock Island

Much like Key West, Key West's shrimping business, is filled with colorful characters.

Even the shrimp boats, or trawlers, have character. If only they could talk. Toughened with salt water and hard work, they head out carrying their crew hoping to return with a full load of "pink gold". But I digress, back to the shrimp.

In my search to follow the day in the life of a shrimp, I head to Stock Island where the shrimp boats come in. I stand peeking through the plastic curtains for a glimpse of the behind the scenes action. A weathered gentleman pulls back the curtain and invite me in to see for myself what happens to the shrimp when they come off the boat. This is "Cowboy". "Cowboy" had just returned from a 28 day stint at sea catching shrimp. He is going to give me the inside scoop.

Once out at sea the crew drop their nets and drag them behind the boat to catch the shrimp. They often catch some unwanted guests too like moray eels, sting-rays and other fish. These creatures are promptly returned to the sea, and the “heading” (or beheading I should say) of the shrimp begins. Once beheaded the tasty shrimp are flash frozen with a contraption that can freeze 350 pounds of shrimp in 3 minutes! Then they are placed in a holding freezer until the crew returns to Key west with their “booty”

Because the conveyor belt was broken they were hauling the 50-pound bags by hand to a machine that “sizes” the shrimp. The machine rolls the shrimp on a big metal bar and it falls through, as the space gets larger. The last shrimp rolling are the biggest and in my humble opinion the best.

When you buy shrimp they usually have a name and a number. For instance, Colossal U/15 shrimp are so big that there are fewer than 15 shrimp per pound. 16/20’s generally have about 18 shrimp per pound and are referred to as Extra Jumbo. Jumbo shrimp (I love a good oxymoron) are 21/25 count and have about 23 shrimp per pound. And while all of these shrimp are delicious, certain sizes serve a better purpose in recipes.



Weighing the bounty.



Cowboy shows me some U-15's

If you want an amazing shrimp cocktail or stuffed shrimp go for the biggest shrimp. Likewise if you are making shrimp salad, there is no need to splurge on the biggest shrimp when smaller will work perfectly. Jumbo (21/25 count) and extra jumbo (16/20 count) are great for a multitude of recipes including bacon wrapped shrimp, coconut shrimp, shrimp skewers, and simple peel-n-eat shrimp...run Forrest run.

Now that the shrimp are sized, it's time to be sold to local restaurants for tonight's service. When the shrimp arrive, the magic begins. After peeling the beauties, (remember to save the shells for a simple shrimp stock) preparation begins for tonight's feature Shrimp Pomodoro. A simply elegant dish of yellow and red tomatoes, garlic, red bell peppers, lemon juice and white wine on a bed of fettuccine.

As the dining room fills up, the first orders come ticking into the kitchen. I have selected the Shrimp Pomodoro, of course. When my meal arrives, the smell makes my mouth water before it is even set down before me. The colors are in Kodachrome and it is an amazing display of nature's bounty. As I stare down about to take the first bite I think of the ocean's gift. I think of the journey from sea to table. I think of shrimpers like Cowboy who toil long hours to bring it to us. I think of the chef's who have created so many amazing ways to

enjoy our Key West pinks. I stop thinking and eat because I can't wait anymore.



Chef Michael Wilson prepares Shrimp Pomodoro



The finished product...

Shrimp Pomodoro

4oz fettuccine
16 pieces 21-25 count Key West pink shrimp
3oz roasted red bell peppers
1 small yellow tomato- diced
1 tbsp minced garlic
1tbsp chopped chives
1 tsp lemon juice
2 oz white wine
Olive oil

Cook fettuccine to al dente- salt and pepper to taste and toss in olive oil and set aside

Sauté shrimp in 2tbsp olive oil until opaque

Add garlic and toss

Add tomatoes, peppers, chives, lemon juice and white wine

Divide fettuccine into 2 pasta bowls and top with sautéed shrimp mixture

Enjoy!

By Melanie Wilson
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