

ECONOMY

Americans love shrimp. But U.S. shrimpers are barely making ends meet

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HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

By John Burnett



7-Minute Listen

+ PLAYLIST

TRANSCRIPT



The Rev. Jesse Garza blesses the shrimp fleet in Port Isabel, Texas, on July 12. Half of the vessels will remain tied up during the summer shrimping season because, their owners say, the Gulf shrimping industry is near collapse.

John Burnett for NPR

PORT ISABEL, Texas — The skiff glides through the harbor as the Catholic priest squirts holy water from a plastic bottle onto the colorful hulls of the shrimp boats just off the southernmost tip of Texas.

"Bless this fleet, their equipment, their crew, their captains," intones the Rev. Jesse Garza of Our Lady, Star of the Sea Catholic Church. "Protect them from the dangers of wind and rain and all the perils of the deep. In the name of the Father, Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen."

The annual blessing of the shrimp fleet is overshadowed this year by the painful reality that half of all the vessels getting a benediction will stay tied up. Shrimp remains America's favorite seafood, yet the rugged livelihood of catching shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico is a dying industry. Gulf shrimpers are facing a perfect storm of expensive diesel fuel, an acute shortage of workers and a flood of cheap imported shrimp.



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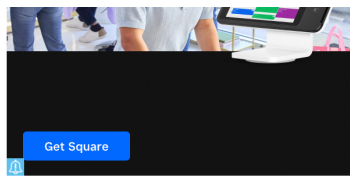


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"This is probably the worst year we've ever seen," says Ida Rivera, who has worked as a bookkeeper for a local shrimping company for more than 40 years. She organizes the shrimp boat blessing every July at the beginning of the Texas summer shrimp season. When she started her job decades ago, Port Isabel and the nearby Port of Brownsville had some 500 boats. Today, the shrimping fleet here is down to fewer than a hundred boats.

"We were the shrimp capital of the world at one point," she says, sitting in the bow of the boat next to the priest and two church ladies singing hymns. "It's sad what it's come down to. It really is."

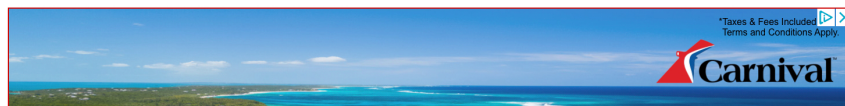
But that's global seafood economics.

"This is our livelihood — for nothing"

In the 1980s, domestic-caught shrimp accounted for half of U.S. consumption. Today, more than 90% of all the shrimp eaten in America is imported, much of it farmed from countries such as India, Indonesia and Ecuador. Raising shrimp in a pond overseas is considerably cheaper than outfitting a shrimp boat.

Standing at the railing of one of the vessels sprinkled with holy water is a solidly built, smiling shrimp boss named E.J. Cuevas. He is director of operations for Cuevas Trawlers, founded by his grandfather in the 1960s. With 11 boats, it's the largest outfit in the Port Isabel Shrimp Basin. But he sent out only six boats this year.

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"Every year it gets less and less and less and less," he says later, while sitting at his uncle's seafood restaurant waiting for a plate of golden-fried, Cuevas-caught shrimp. "It's like, man, we're working our asses off. We're investing all our money. This is our livelihood — for nothing."

Cuevas says he'll be lucky if they break even this year. They're selling a pound of shrimp to wholesalers for \$2.50 to \$3, about what they pay for a gallon of diesel. And the company barely assembled crews in time for the season opening July 15. Guest worker visas came through at the last minute. Their deckhands are from Mexico and Central America. Cuevas says Americans don't want to go out on shrimp boats anymore — the work is grueling and dangerous, with 18-hour days and weeks away from land. He says U.S. shrimpers are facing an existential threat.





E.J. Cuevas (left) and his cousin, Joseph Martinez, stand in front of one of the family shrimping boats. "Every year it gets less and less," Cuevas says of Gulf shrimping. "This is our livelihood — for nothing."
John Burnett for NPR

"What else am I going to do?" he asks. "All I know how to do is shrimp. They want to take that away from me? But it's happening."

It's the same story throughout the Gulf South and up the Eastern Seaboard, says John Williams, Executive Director of the Southern Shrimp Alliance. A glut of frozen shrimp in the marketplace makes everything worse right now, he says.

"People can't afford the fuel," he says. "Then you catch the shrimp and you'd be lucky to sell 'em. And if you do it's for a very, very low price. You just can't make it work."

Safety concerns linger over imported shrimp

For domestic shrimpers, the sad fact is that most diners don't know — and don't seem to care — if they're ordering Gulf or farmed shrimp. There was a time when shrimp was a luxury food and it was all wild-caught. That changed in the early 2000s, when imported shrimp took off.

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"When farm-raised shrimp came along you had certain companies: 'Hey, let's turn shrimp into the next chicken,' " says Greg Londrie, vice president of Zimco Marine in the Brownsville Shrimp Basin. "And here, all of a sudden, everybody and all these countries are raising shrimp."

Over the years, watchdogs have raised concerns about the safety of imported shrimp. In 2015, [Consumer Reports](#) warned that the Food and Drug Administration tests less than 1% of foreign shrimp shipments, far less than European Union countries. The consumer advocate group concluded that while proper cooking kills most bacteria on seafood, there are "real questions about how shrimp is raised, processed and regulated."

The relative lack of government oversight in the U.S. has made it "a dumping ground, per se, for imported, farm-raised shrimp," Londrie says.

In 2017, the Government Accountability Office [issued a critical report](#) calling on the FDA to do a better job of protecting U.S. consumers from imported seafood contaminated with the residues of unsafe drugs that some fish farms use to ward off disease. Every month, [federal port inspectors reject shipments](#) of frozen foreign shrimp because of the presence of antibiotics and contaminations of salmonella and "filthy, putrid ... substances," according to FDA Import Refusal Reports. In March of this year, [the FDA announced](#) that it was enhancing foreign seafood inspections, posting FDA staff in exporting countries, and increasing third-party certification of seafood exports.



BUSINESS

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But remember, Americans love shrimp. Per capita, we eat [more than 5 pounds](#) of it every year. And if we want to keep putting shrimp on everything from power bowls to pad thai, we need aquaculture, as the industry calls it.

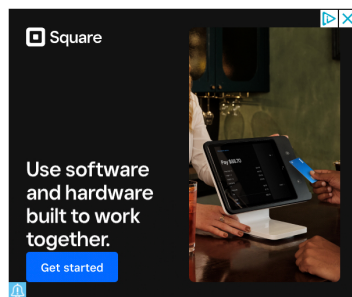


POLITICS

They put food on our tables but live in the shadows. This man is fighting to be seen

"The U.S. Gulf of Mexico cannot produce enough shrimp to satisfy demand domestically. And it's been like that for years. It's not enough," says Steven Hedlund, spokesman for the [Global Seafood Alliance](#), a nonprofit that promotes responsible seafood practices. He says more and more foreign shrimp farms have embraced third-party certification and independent food safety auditors.

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Hoping Americans can taste the difference

One of the founding families of the Port Isabel shrimping industry is the Boudreaux family. They relocated here from Louisiana after World War II with their bigger, more-powerful boats. Penny Boudreaux, daughter of legendary Capt. Wallace Boudreaux, walks along the company dock pointing out the family boats.

"The Mr. Webb was named after my dad's banker because he loved his banker," she says. "And then the Captain Wallace was named after my dad."





Calais Boudreaux (left) and Penny Boudreaux can barely keep the doors open at Twin City Shrimp Co., owned by one of the oldest shrimping families in the Port Isabel area.

John Burnett for NPR

But her boats — blessed, but not seaworthy — have seen better days. The outriggers, nets, winches and barnacle-encrusted hulls all need some serious maintenance.

"You can tell that they haven't been worked on in awhile because usually every year we tie them up, chip them, we paint them, we clean the insides. But right now they're a mess because of the money situation. And it's sad to see 'em like this because they've never looked like that."

Inside the office, they sell 5-pound bags of frozen shrimp packed fresh off the boats. Their customers can tell the difference between wild-caught from the muddy bottom of the Gulf and shrimp raised in tanks or pools.

"This shrimp has a nice firm texture, and imported you're going to get some soft stuff," says Carla McMacken, a local retiree originally from Washington state. "You know, this is fresh. We do a lot of peel and eat. And I boil the shells for a shrimp broth for my gumbo and jambalaya."

For Gulf shrimpers to survive, they need consumers to care about taste, like McMacken.

Some connoisseurs consider [Texas brown shrimp](#) — with their robust, briny flavor and firm shells — to be the best. At Cocteleria Levanta Muertos in Brownsville — the name comes from the establishment's seafood chowder, said to be a hangover cure — owner Louie Ornelas serves only Gulf shrimp.

"The farm-raised shrimp is real white, pale," he says. "The texture is real rubbery. So it's a big, big difference."

If you order his shrimp ceviche, expect to pay a little more. That's because Ornelas pays his supplier about \$5.25 a pound for Gulf shrimp. Switching to imported farmed shrimp could shave \$1.50 off that price, he says.



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"It's a big difference," he says. "So we have to educate our clients on letting them know, yeah, you might pay a little bit more for Texas wild caught shrimp, but it's worth it because of the taste."

A fleet of 14 whittled down to the Blood and Guts

Charles Burnell wishes there were more restaurants like that.

He's worked on and around shrimp boats for nearly 70 of his 89 years. He gets around in an electric wheelchair with a bumper sticker that says "Friends Don't Let Friends Eat Imported Shrimp." I asked him how he likes his shrimp.





Charles Burnell, who has been in the shrimp business nearly all of his 89 years, will not send out his last remaining boat, the Blood and Guts. He says he can't afford to fix its mechanical problems.

John Burnett for NPR

"Well, I'll tell you what my father told me," he says in a South Texas drawl. "He said you got to be a damn sorry cook to ruin a shrimp. Anything you do to 'em is good. I like plain old fried shrimp. You know, a little salt and pepper and flour. Just put 'em in batter and fry 'em."

Back in Port Isabel's heyday, Burnell had 14 boats. Today he has just one.

"The Blood and Guts. She's pretty well known," he says with a hearty chuckle. "Nobody forgets that name."

The Blood and Guts won't go out this season. With the industry in such a sorry state, he can't afford to fix mechanical problems.

Burnell and other shrimpers don't see anything to halt the gloomy trends. Farmed shrimp — now a commodity, like chicken — is plentiful and economical. Wild-caught shrimp has become a pricey, specialty, niche food.

Burnell says Gulf-caught shrimp will never totally disappear.

"There'll always be a mom and pop operation. Like a husband and wife got a little boat, make a couple of drags, come in and have the shrimp on-deck. And they sell 'em to customers right off the boat. Well, they don't have any overhead. They can make it. But you take a boat like this here, we can't do that."

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He has some advice for consumers who love that salty taste of wild Gulf shrimp: Ask for it. Or the Blood and Guts may never sail again.

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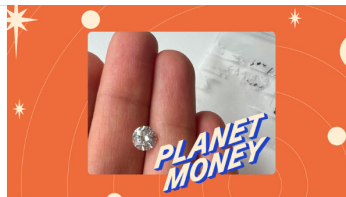
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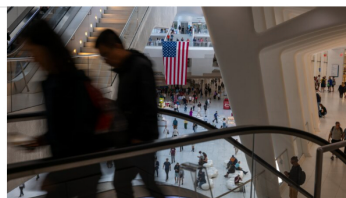
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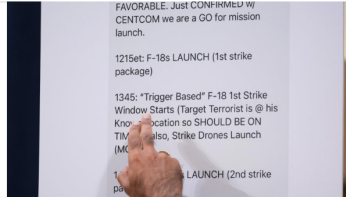
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