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1/27/25

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EXPOSING THE DARK UNDERBELLY OF THE SEAFOOD SCENE IN TAMPA-ST. PETE

Diners Likely Getting an Oceanview Seat while Eating Farm-Raised Shrimp

TAMPA-ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA – Tampa and St. Petersburg, twin jewels on Florida's Gulf Coast, are renowned for their pristine beaches, bustling downtowns, and an abundance of seafood options. However, a recent investigation utilizing genetic tests in the area reveals a surprising finding: despite being situated on the Gulf of Mexico and implying that local shrimp was on the menu, a mere **two out of 44 sampled restaurants** serve authentic, wild-caught Gulf shrimp.

This **shrimp fraud rate of 96%** discovery, unsettling for both locals and visitors, highlights a disconnect between Tampa-St. Pete's seafood reputation and what diners are consuming. While menus may advertise fresh shrimp dishes, most establishments rely on imported, farm-raised shrimp from countries like India, Vietnam, and Ecuador. Only **Salt Shack on the Bay in Tampa** and **Stillwaters Tavern in St. Petersburg** were confirmed to be serving local Gulf shrimp.

A Growing Concern for Seafood Authenticity

Shrimp is the United States' most popular and valuable seafood, with Florida standing as a key supplier. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture, Tampa Bay's proximity to Gulf fishing grounds positions it as a hub for fresh, locally caught shrimp. Yet, the investigation found that many area restaurants fall short of delivering on that promise while using décor, menus, and location to imply otherwise.

"When diners think of Tampa and St. Pete, they think of seafood fresh from the Gulf," said David Williams, Commercial Fishery Scientist and Founder of SEAD Consulting,

who led the sampling effort. “To discover that the majority of restaurants are serving shrimp sourced from overseas is a wake-up call for the area’s food scene.”

“Family-owned shrimp businesses operating out of the Port of Tampa are struggling to survive while local restaurants bamboozle customers into thinking locally caught shrimp are being served,” said John Williams, executive director of the Tarpon Springs-based Southern Shrimp Alliance. “If restaurants wish to serve shrimp from countries associated with labor abuses, environmental harms, and banned antibiotic-use, that is their choice. But be honest and let consumers choose what they eat.”

A Call for Transparency and Change

In 2024, the Federal Trade Commission communicated to seafood restaurants that it is a violation of federal law for restaurants to create an impression that they are offering wild-caught domestic shrimp when farmed, foreign shrimp is being served. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture, mislabeling is illegal, although there are no laws currently in place to enforce mislabeling, and the focus of the law is on grouper and not wild-caught shrimp.

SEAD Consulting’s findings in Florida are the most egregious but consistent with widespread mislabeling of shrimp found in other Gulf Coast cities in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. Diners are encouraged to inquire about the origins of the shrimp on their plates and support establishments that prioritize local, sustainable sourcing.

About Southern Shrimp Alliance

The Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA) is an organization of shrimp fishermen, shrimp processors, and other members of the domestic industry in the eight warmwater shrimp-producing states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas. SSA has funded SEAD Consulting’s genetic testing at restaurants in the Biloxi, MS area, Galveston and Kemah, TX, and in Tampa-St. Petersburg, FL, with more market testing to come. The list of restaurants found to be serving Gulf shrimp in the samples taken by market can be found here.

About SEAD Consulting

SEAD (Seafood Development) Consulting works with diverse stakeholders — seafood producers, academia, governmental agencies, and environmental organizations — to foster innovation and sustainability throughout the sector, bridging commercial fishery science with testing and processing technologies to combat seafood mislabeling and substitution fraud. They currently hold the patent, in partnership with Florida State University, for portable rapid ID high accuracy genetic test RIGHTTest™, being used in a multi-state study to determine shrimp species being served at seafood restaurants. For more information about the investigation and how you can support ethical seafood sourcing, please visit www.seadconsulting.com or contact us at sead@seadconsulting.com. Consumers are also encouraged to contact SeaD Consulting https://www.seadconsulting.com/contact-us to report suspected fraud in their area. #SEADConsulting

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