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Crystal Coast Shrimp Tests Make the Need for Truth in Menu Labeling Crystal Clear

DNA testing finds imported/farm-raised shrimp in 36 of 44 sampled dishes; 34 were explicitly presented as U.S. wild caught/local shrimp

BOGUE BANKS / CRYSTAL COAST, N.C. — September 30, 2026 — A new sampling by SeaD Consulting of 44 shrimp dishes at Bogue Banks and Crystal Coast area restaurants found that the overwhelming majority were misrepresented to consumers as U.S. wild-caught, when testing showed a market dominated with imported/farm-raised shrimp.

- 77% of the sampled dishes were described as having American wild-caught shrimp, however testing show only eight (18%) contained American wild-caught shrimp and thirty-six (82%) contained imported/farm-raised shrimp.
- Of the shrimp dishes tested to be imported/farm-raised, 94% (34 of 36) were described as U.S. wild-caught shrimp.
- Only two establishments serving imported/farm-raised shrimp (6%) told the customer the true origin when asked.

SeaD and SSA say the large gap between what diners believe they are eating, and what they are getting, calls for truth in menu labeling laws and enforcement through on-the-plate genetic testing.

About the Testing

The testing, commissioned by the Southern Shrimp Alliance (SSA), used genetic identification to check what diners received against menu descriptions and/or staff statements. The results reflect specific dishes tested at a restaurant, not every shrimp dish on the restaurant's menu. The purpose is to raise awareness of how often imported farm-raised shrimp is advertised as U.S. wild-caught, a practice that is harming U.S. shrimpers and coastal communities that depend on them, as opposed to testing every restaurant in a market.

Findings at a Glance

Finding	Result
Dishes tested	44
Actually U.S. wild-caught	8 (18%)
Actually imported/farm-raised	36 (82%)
Of all dishes tested, labeled/described as U.S. wild-caught	34 of 44 (77%)
Of imported dishes, falsely described as U.S. wild-caught	34 of 36 (94%)
Of imported dishes, staff disclosed truth when asked	2 of 36 (6%)

“Consumers order local shrimp because they want their dollars to support the boats and families harvesting wild shrimp here,” said **Dave Williams, founder of SeaD Consulting**. “This study shows that many imported/farm-raised dishes are being presented as local wild-caught, and those dollars are failing to reach the industry.”

Several restaurants suggested or expressed that they bought their seafood from local seafood purveyors, such as Miss Gina’s Seafood, when in fact they were serving imports.

“My family and I have earned a reputation for providing high-quality local seafood, putting in the long days and hard work to bring every pound of local shrimp to the dock,” said **Monica Smith, owner of Miss Gina’s Seafood**. “U.S. wild-caught shrimp is a premium product held to high food safety, labor, and environmental laws compared to foreign shrimp that we’ve been fighting against for years. For restaurants to give customers the impression they’re eating local shrimp when they’re being served imports is misleading, dishonest, and absolutely infuriating. That hurts families like mine and deprives paying customers of a choice.”

Some restaurants support U.S. shrimpers and promote their premium product while also using imported shrimp. The problem comes when a lack of labeling leads consumers to believe all shrimp on the menu is U.S. wild-caught, when in fact low-value imported farm-raised shrimp is being served.

“Passing imports off as our catch undercuts the businesses that invest in responsible fishing,” said **Glenn Skinner, executive director of the North Carolina Fisheries Association**. “Most pond-raised imported shrimp come from countries with lax or absent environmental laws compared to the U.S., including mangrove deforestation to create shrimp farms and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing to produce shrimp feed. False advertising of shrimp erases the difference between U.S. wild-caught shrimp and foreign farm-raised shrimp.”

Sustainability of U.S. Wild-Caught Shrimp

According to the [National Marine Fisheries Service](#), “the United States sets a global precedent for shrimp trawl bycatch reduction.” All U.S. shrimpers trawl soft or sandy, muddy bottoms using gear modified to protect non-target marine life, but North Carolina shrimpers go further. In addition to Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), which allow 97% of turtles to swim free and exclude significant amounts of finfish, the state became the first to require certified Bycatch Reduction Devices—and is the only state to require two finfish excluders per net, a combination shown to allow as much as 70% of juvenile finfish to avoid capture. North Carolina is also one of the only states to formally designate

primary and secondary nursery areas, waters closed to shrimping specifically to protect juvenile fish, shrimp, and crabs. **America boasts the world's most sustainable shrimp trawl fishery—one held out as a model of conservation for foreign producers—and North Carolina has some of the highest standards.**

A Comparison with Wilmington and the Outer Banks

In April of 2025, **Wilmington, NC restaurants** were tested and **34 out of 44 seafood establishments tested (77%)** were found to be serving imported/farm-raised shrimp while implying or outright marketing them as U.S. wild-caught shrimp. Then in December 2025, **Outer Banks testing found** American wild-caught shrimp in 16 of 44 sampled restaurant dishes (36%) and **imported/farm-raised shrimp in 28 (64%)**. In June 2026, **a retest of 22 previously sampled restaurants in the Outer Banks** found 11 authentic dishes (50%) and **11 imports (50%)**; 10 of those 11 imports were described as American wild caught. **The retest suggests that scrutiny and public reporting can encourage a shift, while also showing that the problem persisted.**

The Crystal Coast's 77% inauthenticity is higher than both Outer Banks snapshots.

A Case for Disclosure and Verification

North Carolina restaurants do not have a shrimp-specific state menu disclosure requirement of the kind enacted in several other shrimp-producing states. [SSA's Seafood Labeling Laws & Shrimp Authenticity page](#) describes state requirements, restaurant testing, and the need to pair clear labeling with verification. Its September 2026 summary reports misrepresentation in 149 of 488 sampled restaurants (30.5%) in states with labeling laws and 390 of 572 (68%) in states without them.

"I am disappointed to learn that so many local restaurants are misrepresenting the source of their seafood to their diners in our coastal communities. We should expect truthfulness from businesses serving North Carolinians, and accountability is in order. The results of the Outer Banks retest show that public awareness through genetic testing and publicity can make a real difference, and we are seeing that labelling laws passed in other states have helped significantly" said Rep. Celeste Cairns, who represents North Carolina House District 13. "As lawmakers consider bills to be drafted and introduced during the 2027 session, several of us are working on language that would require truth in menu labeling and provide meaningful methods of enforcement."

Restaurants whose sampled dishes matched U.S. wild-caught representations

The following eight establishments were identified in the supplied Crystal Coast results. This is a finding about one sampled dish at each location, not certification of the full menu:

1. Bahia Beach House — 208 West Dr, Atlantic Beach, NC 28512
2. Gaffer's — 9106-A Coast Guard Rd, Emerald Isle, NC 28594
3. Preston's Corner Bar & Grill — 106 Front St, Swansboro, NC 28584
4. Rhumbar — 300 Front Street, Beaufort, NC 28516
5. Riverside Steak & Seafood — 506 W Corbett Ave, Swansboro, NC 28584

6. Southern Salt Seafood Company and Waterfront Restaurant — 701 Evans St, Morehead City, NC 28557

7. Table 9 Seafood — 1104 W Fort Macon Rd, Atlantic Beach, NC 28512

8. The Crab Shack — 146 Headen Ln, Pine Knoll Shores, NC 28512

"We celebrate the tested restaurants using U.S. wild-caught shrimp and know there are others that weren't sampled. Consumers deserve transparency," said **Blake Price**, executive director of the Southern Shrimp Alliance. "If a restaurant buys cheaper imported shrimp, that's their choice, and they should market that product. But this testing demonstrates the lack of transparency—even when consumers ask. And those stolen sales ripple through coastal communities from North Carolina to Texas, seriously impacting coastal jobs and businesses."

Call to Action for Consumers

Supporting area restaurants that serve verified U.S. wild-caught shrimp helps to sustain North Carolina's coastal communities. Until laws are in place, diners are encouraged to ask restaurants about the country of origin of the shrimp they are being served and ask to see proof.

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 throughout their region. The list of restaurants found to be serving American wild-caught shrimp in the samples taken by market can be seen [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. They currently hold the patent, in partnership with Florida State University, for the 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

Disclaimer: SeaD's testing and reporting is intended to be used as an investigatory tool to assist the restaurant industry's fight against seafood mislabeling and is not intended for use in any legal proceedings, nor may SeaD's data, testing, or reporting be used in any legal proceeding without the express written authorization of SeaD.

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