

All About Shrimp

Bite size to “colossal”, shrimp come in a variety of sizes. In fact there are more than 300 different species of shrimp. In some places, shrimp are called prawns and often the term prawn is used to describe the larger varieties of shrimp. Though similar, there are differences between shrimp and prawns including differing gill structures and egg-brooding methods.

Nutritionally, shrimp are a good source of protein, and at the same time, are relatively low in fat and calories. They are also a good source of vitamin B12 and omega-3 fatty acids that have recently been hailed for their anti-inflammatory effects and ability to prevent heart disease and the formation of blood clots.

Some people have expressed concerns over the high cholesterol content of shrimp. However, while shrimp are high in cholesterol they are low in saturated fat. Saturated fat is the type of fat that causes human cholesterol levels to raise leading to health risks, including cardiovascular diseases. In comparison, meat and dairy products, which are also high in protein, are often high in saturated fat.

Know Your Shrimp

When sold in stores, shrimp is often labeled by its variety like tiger or gulf. Some are farm raised and some are wild and there are cold and warm water varieties. They are usually also labeled by their “count.” The count denotes the average number of shrimp per pound in a particular size category. Extra small shrimp are labeled 61/70 and have an average of 65 shrimp per pound. Large are 31/35 count. Jumbo are 21/25 count and colossal shrimp range under 15 per pound.

Depending on how you’re going to serve them, there’s a shrimp for every recipe. The smaller sizes are ideal for popcorn fried shrimp and are great in pasta recipes and gumbo. The medium to large sizes are versatile and can be used in just about any recipe. Jumbo, extra large, colossal, giant; call them what you will, the truly large varieties of shrimp are ideal for grilling and shrimp cocktail.

Size isn’t everything with shrimp though. Each species of shrimp has different flavors and textures based on the water they were harvested from and their diet.

Unless you live close to the coast be wary of fresh shrimp. Fresh shrimp should be eaten within 23 hours. Most often shrimp purchased in a grocery store has been frozen and then thawed. Frozen shrimp will keep for a few weeks, but once thawed will perish after a few days.

Smell is a dead giveaway for shrimp quality. Shrimp should smell like salt water. Smells similar to ammonia or iodine are an indicator that the shrimp has started to spoil. Unusual smells could also be evidence that someone has tampered with the shrimp to mask their freshness. For some reason shrimp that have had the head removed stay fresh longer. Black spots or a slimy texture are visual indicators of bad shrimp.

Peeling and De-veining

What is referred to as the shrimps' "vein" is actually its digestive tract. While edible, some people are averse to eating this and insist that de-veined shrimp tastes better. The veins can be dirty/sandy and are almost always removed in larger shrimp.

To peel a shrimp, take a small knife and try to remove the last section of the shell above the tail. Once you get the hang of it you can then remove the rest of the shell in one motion. At this point you can de-vein the shrimp by cutting along its back and then removing the "vein."

Asheville Seafood Restaurant Knows Its Shrimp

George Baxevanis is the owner of Fisherman's Quarters II in West Asheville, NC and shrimp is his business. His restaurant serves 100 pounds of fried baby shrimp, daily! A calabash-style family restaurant, the fried shrimp and seafood platters are customer favorites, but its menu offers other classic shrimp preparations as well.

"In addition to fried shrimp, we also serve shrimp cocktail, broiled shrimp, boiled shrimp and shrimp pastas including scampi, Alfredo and the "cast net" pasta that features shrimp alongside calamari, scallops and muscles," says Baxevanis.