

on the water

# Sweet & Succulent

## Mississippi Freshwater Prawns

BY ANGELA KNIPPLE  
PHOTOS BY PAUL KNIPPLE

**D**riving into the Mississippi Delta from Memphis is almost like entering another world. Things get quieter the further south you go along the river. The land flattens out into fields where you often see sea gulls darting down to feed. This is land where you expect cotton and rice and catfish. They are all there, but in decreasing numbers. The fields are now mostly planted with corn, and many of the ponds are being filled in. But not all of them. Some are finding new life as a home to one of the last things you would expect to find in the Delta, Malaysian freshwater prawns.

Lauren Farms sits along a winding back road near Leland, Mississippi. The ponds dotting the farm were once filled only with catfish, but, as owner Delores Fratesi tells us, they realized that they needed to diversify to stay profitable. They began investigating, and ended up working with the aquaculture program at Mississippi State University. That's where they learned about freshwater prawns and brought a whole new delicacy to the Mississippi Delta.

It's easy to confuse these prawns with shrimp, but they're actually very different.

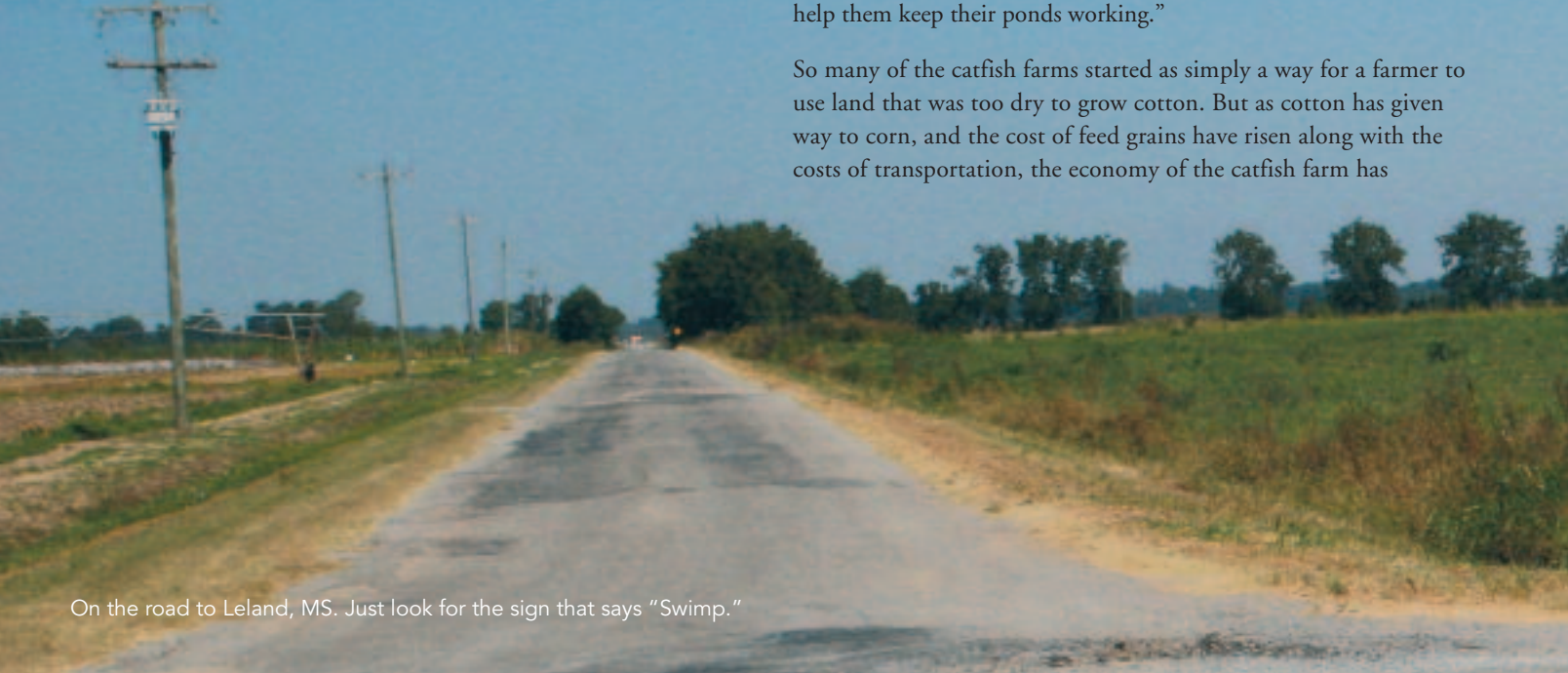
Only the first part of their lives is spent in salt water. In the wild, these prawns follow the rivers into the tidal basins to spawn and hatch. After that, they return upstream to live in freshwater until it is time to spawn again. In the Delta, special tanks provide the saltwater environment that the hatchlings need to grow.

From a flavor perspective, the taste is more delicate than shrimp; it's actually sweeter and closer to the flavor and texture of lobster. Much of this flavor is a result of the clean Mississippi water that these prawns live in and their all-grain diet. Their controlled environment gives them more consistency than saltwater shrimp.

While Lauren Farms is the first to embrace raising prawns, they're working hard to help other farmers join the business. Delores and her husband Steve host seminars throughout the year to educate interested farmers about what it takes to get started raising freshwater prawns and even sell some of their own stock to help people get started.

"It's so important for farmers here in the Delta to find ways to diversify," says Delores. "We've seen so many of the catfish farms go out of business in the past few years, and we really see this as one way to help them keep their ponds working."

So many of the catfish farms started as simply a way for a farmer to use land that was too dry to grow cotton. But as cotton has given way to corn, and the cost of feed grains have risen along with the costs of transportation, the economy of the catfish farm has



On the road to Leland, MS. Just look for the sign that says "Swimp."

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tightened. Add in the fact that the growers had to lower the prices on their fish to meet the prices of imported catfish that have flooded the market, and many of the farms were doing good to break even. Some have seen changing their farms to plant corn and soybeans as the only way to solvency.

At one point, the aquaculture industry in the Delta employed more than 10,000 people. As the farms have closed and ponds have been filled in to become corn fields, many of those jobs have simply disappeared. For an economy as delicate as that of the Delta, the ripple effects of those lost jobs can be devastating. Property owners see their tenants forced to move for new jobs, local businesses see their customer base shrink, and a whole culture of life in the Delta is at risk of disappearing.

While many of the former catfish farm workers would have never thought they would be working with prawns, they welcome the change because it allows them to continue living and working in the Delta.

Freshwater prawns are not only good for the economy of the Delta, they're also good for the environment. They require no chemicals for

growth and cause very little erosion of the pond banks. They add no pollutants to the water in the Delta. They're raised in large ponds where they're not crowded or exposed to disease. They've also been named a "Best Choice" by the Seafood Watch program as a sustainable seafood product for both 2008 and 2009. As Delores says, "I feel like I have a treasure here in Mississippi—wonderfully delicious and sustainable seafood right here in my backyard."

Why haven't we heard about freshwater prawns before? Why can't we buy them at our local grocery stores? Well, for one thing, the industry is still relatively new to the Delta. The Fratesis themselves have been raising prawns since 1995, but the first years were focused less on producing a high volume of prawns and more on learning the best ways to raise them from hatch to harvest. They also don't produce a volume of prawns that can compare to the volume of shrimp.

And then there's familiarity. Once you've tasted these prawns, you'll just want more of them, but it's not easy to convince grocery stores to carry a product that they don't know or that they don't know if their customers will want. Even though these prawns are grown close to home, they seem more exotic than the shrimp we're all used to. The prawns are cur-



## PRAWNS WITH ANDOUILLE, GRITS, GREENS AND ONION BUTTER

Recipe courtesy of Chef Jackson Kramer,  
Interim Restaurant and Bar

- 3 lbs Lauren Farms prawns, shells removed, deveined
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 2 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 2 lbs Stan's andouille sausage, medium diced
- ½ cup Delta Grind grits, uncooked
- 2 cups water
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ¼ cup Grana Padano cheese (or good Parmesan), grated
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 bunches Flora at Bluebird Farms young collard greens, washed and chopped
- 1 carrot, peeled and diced
- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
- ½ lb butter, unsalted, cold
- 1 bunch spring onions, finely sliced
- juice from 1 lemon
- salt and pepper

**For the grits:** Bring the two cups of water to a boil and slowly whisk in the grits. Once they're mixed well, turn down the heat to a light simmer. Stir frequently. After about 45 minutes, add the heavy cream and cheese. Add salt and pepper to taste.

**For the collard greens:** In a large saucepan heat olive oil over medium-high heat. Add carrots and onions. Cook for 10 minutes. Add greens and cover with water. Add the vinegar, salt and pepper. Simmer for about an hour. Once tender, season with salt and pepper to taste. They usually need lots of salt, but the younger the greens, the less bitter they will be.

**For the prawns:** In a sauté pan, add 1 tablespoon of butter and cook the garlic until fragrant. Add the chorizo and cook through. Add prawns and cook for 1–2 minutes. The prawns cook very fast.

**For the butter sauce:** In a small pot add a tablespoon of water. Warm it up over low heat. Start adding the butter in small amounts and whisk steadily. The heat should just be enough to melt the butter, but not to separate it. Add all the butter until fully emulsified. Add the onions and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

**To plate:** In the middle of a large bowl, place a nice spoonful of grits and top with the collard greens. Place prawns and andouille on top and around the grits and greens. Ladle a few tablespoons of the butter sauce around the prawns. Serve immediately. Makes 4–6 portions.



rently only processed at the farms, meaning that all responsibility for packaging and distributing the prawns falls on the farmers.

So how do you get these beautiful prawns on your table? Well, you just have to go visit the Fratesi family. The prawns are harvested at the end of September every year. While the prawns are available frozen at the farm year round, you can only get them fresh during the harvest. It's worth the trip; the process of the harvest is fascinating.

The prawns are pulled from the ponds and brought back to the sinks in large water tanks. Then they're gathered by the bucketful and taken in to be washed and sorted by size. Sound easy? Then, you haven't met a feisty freshwater prawn. Their claws are small, but they're attached to long legs that move fast. Luckily, while you can take a peek at the process, all of the sorting will be done for you by the professionals. You'll get to take home bags of prawns ready to cook.

What can you do with those prawns? Anything that you would do with shrimp and then some. The extra sweetness and texture of the prawns means that you can use them in some recipes where you would normally use lobster. My personal favorites? Poached in butter *a la* Jackson Kramer of Interim or in a simple prawn salad with fresh dill made into a sandwich with lightly buttered whole grain bread.

No matter how you use them, they're a seasonal delicacy that you won't want to miss this year. Just hurry to the harvest before our local chefs beat you there. And look for them on local menus. Maybe these prawns are not what came to your mind when you thought about the Mississippi Delta, but you'll taste the flavor of the Delta in every bite. Sweet, luxurious, and truly Southern.

This year's harvest will take place on September 19 and September 26. Call Steve and Delores Fratesi ahead of the harvest to book your prawns for one of the harvest dates. Call in advance, since they always sell out. Also, if you've booked prawns but won't be able to get to the farm until after 1:00 PM, let the Fratesis know so that your prawns won't be sold to someone else. And don't forget a cooler with ice to keep your prawns fresh on the way home. *eM*



**Lauren Farms Freshwater Prawns**

655 Napanee Road, Leland, Mississippi 38756  
 662-390-3528 • [www.laurenfarms.com](http://www.laurenfarms.com)

Even though they were cute, Angela Knipple has, thus far, successfully avoided being bitten by a prawn. To learn if her streak holds, check her out at [www.paulandangela.net](http://www.paulandangela.net).

**ANGELA'S PRAWN SALAD SANDWICH**

**Recipe courtesy of Angela Knipple**

This is a nice, simple sandwich that's wonderfully refreshing on a hot day.

- 4 oz boiled prawn tails, peeled and deveined, chilled
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise (homemade is best)
- 1 teaspoon fresh dill, chopped fine
- squeeze of lemon juice
- freshly ground black pepper
- handful of arugula or watercress
- butter
- 2 thick slices whole grain bread

In a medium bowl, mix together the mayonnaise, dill, lemon juice, and pepper. Add the prawns and toss until the prawns are coated lightly in the mayonnaise mixture.

Butter one side of each piece of bread. Spread the prawn mixture onto one buttered slice and top with the arugula or watercress. Cover with the second buttered slice of bread. Cut into halves on the diagonal and enjoy! Serves 1.