# Trawling for Shrimp

## *Excerpted from* Buttermilk Graffiti

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Illustrations by Ran Zheng

# Crossing from Seabrook into Kemah,

for a moment I get the feeling I'm floating on air—the highway elevates so swiftly over the piers. To my left is a clear view of the rich blue waters that stretch into Galveston Bay. The color mirrors the Texas sky. I am on my way to Galveston to secure a shipment of Gulf shrimp for my restaurant. It is something I have to have on my menu. Shrimp crosses all culinary borders. From the pages of *Nathalie Dupree's Shrimp and Grits Cookbook* to the melamine plates of Vietnamese crepes stuffed with shrimp and pork to chilled martini glasses of shrimp cocktail served at every steak house in America, shrimp are adored everywhere. I've tried to avoid shrimp on my menus, but the demand is just too high. Americans consume about 1.3 billion pounds of shrimp annually. So here I am in shrimp country, to see with my own eyes an industry that has been much maligned. If I'm going to cook with shrimp, I need to find a source I can trust.

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If you eat shrimp regularly, chances are they come from Southeast Asia, where they were most likely farmed in overcrowded mud ponds manned by poor subsistence workers barely able to eke out a living. These shrimp swim in a toxic cocktail of fertilizers and antibiotics, to ward off the host of diseases that infect these monoculture-breeding facilities. Still, chances are the shrimp don't taste all that bad. Most farmed shrimp from Asia have no detectable flavor, good or bad. Once you dust them with paprika and cumin and blacken them in a cast-iron pan, or drown them in a spicy sweet-and-sour sauce, it matters little how flavorless they are. It is easy to overlook the chemical bath they were treated in before they arrived in frozen five-pound bricks. Shrimp are a cheap commodity, the equivalent of aquatic vermin.

I pull into a Vietnamese restaurant in Kemah. All along the Gulf Coast, from Seabrook to Galveston to Palacios, Vietnamese fishermen have settled into communities that started when thousands of refugees were relocated here after the Vietnam War. I sit down and order báhn xèo, a popular dish on the menu in every Vietnamese restaurant in America. It is a light, crispy crepe of turmeric and rice flour folded over shrimp, pork, and bean sprouts and served with a sweet dipping sauce. The place is bright and airy. The customers are white and working class and polite. On my table is the familiar plastic chopstick holder that opens up when you pull a knob on the lid. Bottles of Sriracha and soy sauce sit on a plastic tray. My waitress goes back and forth between taking orders and studying an oversize textbook.

When the crepe arrives, I can tell the shrimp is not from the Gulf. I ask the waitress, but she tells me she doesn't know. I'm hungry, so I finish what's on my plate, wondering as I eat if it is more authentic for a Vietnamese restaurant to use frozen shrimp farmed in Vietnam than Gulf shrimp. Then I wonder if any of the restaurants here use the local shrimp, or if the lure of cheap imports is just too tempting. The waitress tells me she is a college student studying for an exam. This is her uncle's restaurant; her aunt is the cook. I tell her I'm here to interview Vietnamese shrimpers and could she ask her uncle if he knows any. She doesn't hesitate to answer.

"They will not talk to you," she says bluntly. "Mostly, they want to be left alone."

"Is it because of all the racial stuff that happened here in the past?"

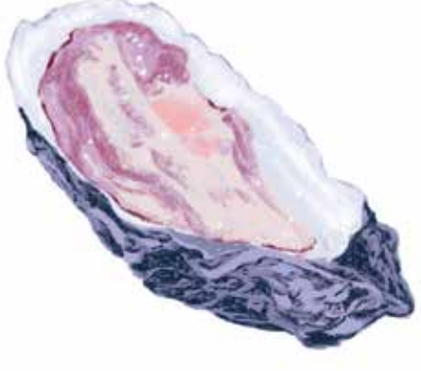
The relationship between the Vietnamese fishermen and the local Texas fishermen has long been punctuated by controversy; skirmishes have boiled over into fights and even murders. After the Vietnam War, when thousands of refugees were placed along the Texas Gulf, many did what they knew how to do best: fish. This was a time before stringent regulations, and the Vietnamese, desperate to make a living, broke many of the unwritten rules of the bay. They skirted laws, they ignored limits, they transformed an old Texas profession into a cutthroat business. This behavior coincided with the rage many Texans felt over unfair demonization of American Vietnam War veterans. Though the immigrants were on the same side of the fight in Vietnam as Americans, here in Texas, tensions between Vietnamese and white fishermen ran hot like a breezeless summer night. The strife was further complicated by a growing industry of cheap farmed shrimp from Southeast Asia flooding the American market, driving shrimp prices to all-time lows. Many of the Texas old-timers were pushed out of business. Many blamed the Vietnamese for eroding a way of life that, on the Gulf Coast, was more than just a profession; it was a tradition. Others argued that the shrimp industry was already in decline with or without the Vietnamese. Even so, the tensions ignited into

violence. Vietnamese shrimp boats were burned, shots were fired, rallies were held, and at one point, the KKK got involved. A generation of mistrust and resentment ensued.

This was more than thirty years ago, and the hatred has subsided, I'm told. Still, the local industry has been steadily constrained by catch limits, overfishing, oil spills, and increasing environmental regulations, and all the while, the amount of imported shrimp continues to rise. The Vietnamese shrimpers fare no better today than anyone else suffering in an industry that is being choked from all sides. I'm told that nowadays everyone gets along because no one is doing any better than the next guy.

"That was a long time ago," the waitress says. "I'm too young to remember all that."

Her aunt comes out of the kitchen, and I awkwardly thank her for a delicious meal. She doesn't speak much English, and my waitress, eager to get back to her studies, does not volunteer to interpret. I pack up my notebook, but then, just as I am about to leave, the young waitress turns to me suddenly and says, "During the war, everyone came to Vietnam and burned it down, so they had no choice but to leave. They came here to work, not to fight."



## San Leon is a quiet coastal town

a bit farther down from Kemah. It occupies a peninsula that juts out like the tip of an oyster knife piercing Galveston Bay. It is a town of mobile home parks and modest houses built on stilts, a backwater resort where one can get away from the noise of everyday life. On the Bayshore side are restaurants and a few nautical-themed bars, such as Gilhooley's, a perfect place to waste an afternoon drinking tequila and slurping down Gulf oysters. The other side of the peninsula is where the commercial fishing boats dock. I drive along the edge of the water looking for people to talk to. Near an oyster processing plant, I see a few Mexican workers wrapping up for the day. The crying of the seagulls drowns out any other noise as they circle and dart menacingly. As I approach, the men rise to their feet. I ask them where I can find Vietnamese shrimpers. They tell me if I want to catch up with them, I have to go to Twenty-Second Street an hour before dawn. I pencil that into my notebook. The men don't sit down again until I'm back in my car.

I drive down the coast another thirty minutes, to Galveston. I'm meeting up with Kenny from Katie's Seafood Market on Pier 19, a small storefront operation that is actually one of the largest fish purveyors in the Gulf. Katie's is a proud family-owned business made famous by Buddy Guindon, a larger-than-life figure and an outspoken proponent of the Gulf. "Kenny" is the brother who works behind the scenes. He is thoughtful and generous with his time. He looks like he hasn't combed his hair in weeks. His hands are black from working a forklift all day.

Kenny tells me that the real money in the Gulf is in snapper and big-game fish farther offshore; the shrimp business is a lost cause. We walk around his shop looking at all the varieties of shrimp he has displayed on mountains of crushed ice. White shrimp from the bay, brown shrimp from deep waters, small bait shrimp, and Royal Reds from Louisiana. I taste the ones from the bay. They are small, white, and delicate. I prefer them to the larger varieties. Most of the bay shrimp goes straight to bait shops, where they are used to fish for larger game. This is a shame. These little guys are special, nothing like the spongy, flavorless curls of flesh that went into my báhn xèo. Kenny tells me the shrimpers can't make enough money selling these shrimp to wholesalers. In an industry flooded with cheap imports, there is no demand for these tasty bay shrimp. There may come a day, he laments, when they close the bay to commercial fishing altogether.

It is easy to get discouraged. In my experience, people in the fishing industry are a depressing lot. Their world is always on the brink of Armageddon and has been that way for as long as Kenny can remember. Kenny is quick to share with me a world of problems, but he has a shine in his eyes. He gets it from the water. He tells me he will pass along my order to his brother, Buddy. Right now, he has to get back to work. The forklift has been acting up all day. He winces at the sound of a truck backing up to his property. He's got to load up a large order of tilefish for a customer in Houston. As he walks away, I see he has a slight limp, but something in his eyes tells me he'll outlive the rest of us who lose our minds every time our wireless Internet goes awry.

## The next day, I drive back to San Leon at 5:00 a.m.

I arrive at the docks while the Vietnamese shrimpers are preparing their boats.

It is still night. The winds are invisible in the dark, but I can feel them building strength above my head. There are about twenty shrimp boats docked in a makeshift marina of crooked pilings and rotting wooden planks. A squat cinder-block building provides the only light. The shrimp boats are rocking back and forth in the wind. All these boats are small single-engine trawlers no more than forty feet long with a boom and a net. They are in varying degrees of disarray. Only a few boats have turned on their work lights, which are perched high above the cabin. I can see a few men working on nets or drinking coffee. They're listening to the weather report on their radios. No one is willing to talk to me. I pace the docks trying to look as unsuspicious and trustworthy as I know how. I get to the end of one side of the dock and watch a boat go out, sputtering smoke as it slowly grinds through the choppy waters. I can hear flags whipping in the wind somewhere behind me. There are distant lights on the other side of the bay, and they seem like a planet away. I want to get out on the water, though I know my chances are slim. I turn around to make another pass around the docks. Just then, a man jumps off his boat to have a cigarette. I offer him one of mine. It's hard to light the cigarette in this wind, so I

huddle in close. His face is worn and wrinkled. I can't tell how old he might be because the sea seems to have aged him beyond his years. His cheeks are brown and shapeless, his eyes emotionless. I can see tufts of graying hair under the brim of his Texans baseball cap. He is wearing a windbreaker, polyester slacks, and sandals on his feet—not exactly the uniform of an experienced sailor. His name is Mr. Ton. He tells me he works the entire boat himself, which is dangerous. Seagulls alight on the boats as if wakened by the motors around us.

I pretend to complain about the weather. He is not going out, he says. Too windy. His pickup truck is parked nearby, and he disappears into it for a while, talking loudly into his cell phone. Then he returns, and before he can get back on his boat, I grab his arm and ask him if he'll take me out on his boat. I offer him money. He shakes his head to tell me it is a preposterous idea. His work light is flickering, so he gets on his boat to fix it. Two more boats go out, and my chances of getting on one are dwindling. There is a small window to go out and catch shrimp while they are motionless, in the dark hours before dawn. The wind brings to shore a gust of low-pressure air that fills my lungs with salt. Mr. Ton ignores me, but I wait by his boat drinking tepid coffee and looking like a lost pet.

Suddenly, he looks up at me and waves me onto his boat. He will make one pass, that's it. He tells me to stay out of his way. He starts the engine, and we head out behind another boat that is spitting diesel smoke into the air. Mr. Ton tells me to wait in a small area of the boat next to the winch and the engine room. The sky is still dark. I can hear the sloshing of water, but otherwise, I'm blind to what is around me. I can see only what is happening on the boat.

Mr. Ton is agile for a man his age, whatever that may be. He runs back and forth between the captain's chair and the back of the boat as he lowers the outriggers. The mechanisms on these boats are very simple, not like those for the large commercial boats that go offshore deep into the Gulf. We drive slowly to a spot not far from the docks. Mr. Ton guides heavy metal doors, each one weighing about four hundred pounds, out over the black water. The nylon shrimp net goes out over the sides, and he lowers the doors into the bay. The net will unfurl into a conical shape and drag across the bottom of the bay. The doors keep the trawl net spread open. A tickler chain runs ahead of the net to stir up the floor and kick the shrimp out of the mud.

Mr. Ton moves the boat slowly over the water. He looks into the choppy waves as though he can see what is happening underneath. He is calm now, smoking a cigarette. He tells me he bought this boat for forty thousand dollars over twenty years ago. It has been a good living, he tells me, but not so much anymore. His kids are grown up, and he fishes only when the catch is good, which is not often. On a day like this, everyone loses money. He points to the corks floating on the water, but I can't understand what he's saying. He looks out over the water and shakes his head repeatedly.



A small sliver of dawn is pushing up from the horizon. Mr. Ton pushes me aside to start the winch. It has been only thirty minutes, but he has decided to pull up his net. The gulls go crazy as the net emerges from the water. Mr. Ton guides the net over the holding box. He releases the slipknots tied to the bottom of the net. A small catch of shrimp falls into the box. It isn't much. Maybe twenty pounds. Mr. Ton is disappointed but shrugs as if to say he knew as much. The winds are picking up. He is eager to get back. He points to the other boats and gestures to tell me they are wasting their time. He reties the rope around the net and sets it aside.

Knots serve many functions. The obvious one is to connect two things. Most of the knots we use in our day-to-day lives have some origin in nautical history. Before mechanization, a sailor's life depended on knots. The trick of a good knot is making a pattern you can control. Anyone can tie a knot that binds. Anyone can use friction to create tension. The real skill is tying a knot that doesn't move but will easily release when you need it to. In an age of steel and motors, knot making is a dying art. On a boat like this, you probably need to know only a few knots to perform all the tasks needed. Mr. Ton uses a clove hitch to tie the boat up to the piling. It is a remarkably simple knot that clamps under its own loop. I'm sure he doesn't know the name of this knot that he has tied countless times in his life, at least not in English.

I help Mr. Ton transfer his catch into a plastic bucket, which he loads onto the back of his pickup truck. This will go straight to a bait shop. I offer him money for his time. He smiles at me for the first time and refuses. I give him the rest of my cigarettes. He says good-bye unceremoniously and drives off, his tires kicking dust onto my jeans. It is just getting light. A lot of the other boats start to come back, with little to show for their efforts. The wind has whipped up into a circular motion. The palm tree leaves are clapping violently. Seagulls cackle in protest.

Hurricane Ike still haunts this region like a nightmare. In 2008, a tropical cyclone swelled into a Category 4 storm that made landfall in Galveston on September 13. The storm winds ripped away trees. They leveled everything. Dozens of people lost their lives, and the storm left billions of dollars in damage. People here refer to time as before Ike or after Ike. After Ike, everything had to be rebuilt, so everything here looks almost new. But there are still remnants of empty plots of land where houses once stood. And then there are these battle-scarred shrimp boats. Some survived the storm intact; others were repaired or rebuilt. To the Vietnamese immigrants here, this was their livelihood, and they would patch it and get back to work. They were the first ones back on the water after the storm. Their boats look tattered, but they work. They creak and they cough. In the light of the new morning, they look like ghost ships kept afloat against their will.

The fishermen hurry to their cars and drive off. For a moment, I think about following them in my car. But what would I

do if I caught up to one of them? I can offer nothing they want. And what I want from them—their privacy, their trust—is as elusive as darting fish in an oil-black sea.

I can't find any Vietnamese restaurants in San Leon, so I stop at a Mexican restaurant for breakfast. I see migas on the menu and order it. Crispy corn tortillas mixed with eggs, pico de gallo served with refried beans and soft warm tortillas—it is a filling breakfast. At another table, a couple is eating breakfast with their small child playing at their feet. On the wall over the kitchen pass is a picture of Pancho Villa decorated like a shrine. The cook hands me a bottle of Cholula hot sauce, and the familiarity of it makes me happy. The restaurant is filling up with what seem like workers whose day has been cut short by the restless winds. The cook is also taking orders, and he's getting in the weeds. His father, seated at a table next to the TV, is watching CNN. He turns to look helplessly at his son, who's trying to write down the orders as fast as he can. I bus my own dirty plates and wipe down my table so a group of men in work boots can sit down.

**I take a long nap in my car**

and wake to the shrill cries of seagulls. It is lunchtime, so I head to a restaurant called Topwater Grill, at the end of Ninth Street, looking out over the bay. It looks like your typical fun-loving wharf eatery, complete with fishing tackle decorations and the Zach Brown Band blaring from the speakers. The building sits on a piece of dock historically known as April Fool Point. It was one of the points of entry for slave ships from Africa. Just past the entrance is a display of T-shirts, hats, and beer koozies for sale. Places like this are typically not where you go for great seafood, but Topwater Grill has a stellar reputation, and I want to check the place out. Behind the restaurant is a small loading dock, mostly for small sport-fishing boats. The owner of the restaurant is Captain Wally, and everyone in San Leon knows him. You can find him here, but no one knows exactly when. You just have to catch him on his rounds. He doesn't like to stay in one place very long, the manager tells me.

I leave my name and number with the hostess so she can call me when Captain Wally arrives. I sit down for lunch. I start with Gulf oysters roasted with garlic and oil. Then I devour a basket of steamed Royal Red shrimp with drawn butter and a little Texas Pete hot sauce. The menu runs the gamut from Camerones Rancheros to Boudin Balls. The redfish with Ponchartrain sauce is delicious. As I am finishing up, a waitress comes by to tell me there has been a Captain Wally sighting. I wait for a long time to see if he'll come by my table. He finally does. He is wearing a clean outfit of shorts and a sport windbreaker. He is a kind-looking man with wrinkled sea skin and a thick Polish accent. He asks if I'm Edward. I tell him yes, and he stares at me with some suspicion. What is it exactly I'm looking for, he asks. I tell him about my book, and he reluctantly sits with me. He starts by telling me he doesn't have a lot of time. He has to meet with some contractors about a new development.

We talk about the food, and I thank him for his commitment to serving fish from the Gulf. He shows me a wall with all the accolades he has received over the years. He tells me he had many more but that those got washed away with Ike. We talk about fishing and life in San Leon. I ask him if he gets along with the Vietnamese shrimpers. Yes, he tells me. He works with them all, and they are his friends.

"But it's hard for the old-timers," he tells me. "Their kids do fine, they become American, but the older ones, they have a hard time letting go. I tell them, 'This here is America. Why do you want to make this place Vietnam?' I've had my own story, you know, but when I got here, I said to myself, I am going to embrace this country."

I ask him what his story is. He lets out a sigh. It's too long to recount.

"Anyway," he says, "I'll just give you the short version. It was 1940 when the Russians came into Tarnopol. I was five years old at the time. They gave us twenty minutes to pack, mostly clothes, some provisions. They put us on a sled and took us to the railroad station. We were transported for two to three weeks. We had never left Poland before, and here we were, traveling weeks by rail with little food and no medicine and nowhere to sleep. When we got out of the train, we found out we were in Siberia. My parents were forced to work in a labor camp in the forest. We didn't think we would survive. Some months later, they were transporting us again by train, to another labor camp even deeper into Siberia. The train doors were left open, and my father decided we would jump. He went first and the children went next, and last was my mother. We walked to a nearby village in the snow. A woman, God bless her, allowed us to stay with her.

"This was 1942, and the Germans were beating up on the Russians. The Germans were recruiting all Polish men to fight with them, and if they did, they promised that their families could return to Poland. So my father joined. They took him away, and we didn't see him for a long time. We heard he was fighting in Persia. Well, we were still in Siberia thinking we would go back to Poland, but then my mother heard of a group of families that were heading to Iran. We jumped aboard a train in the direction of the Caspian Sea. To this day, I still don't know how my mother found the strength and will to keep my brother and me safe on that journey. We didn't have papers; we didn't have money. My brother and I hid under the seat compartments almost the whole trip. When we got off the train, we took oxcarts and trolleys. We were walking along a deserted road when we saw a military truck drive by. They were Polish soldiers, and when they realized we were from Poland, they let us on the truck and took us to Tashkent. From there we somehow got to a port on the Caspian

Sea, where we waited to board a boat for Iran. Well, we finally got to Iran, where we lived in a tent city for many months."

I'm writing very fast, trying to get every detail of his story right. I'm not concerned with the facts or the question of how he could know so many details of his life from the age of five. It is clear to me he has told this story before, but that makes it no less fascinating.

"I saw my father once, for two days,

during all that time, and then we didn't see him again for another seven years after that. We moved to Tehran, where we lived in a refugee camp. They set up Polish schools, and we lived six months there. Then we got on lorries and traveled through some very dangerous parts to get to the Persian Gulf. They put us on a boat to Karachi, which was then India; now it's Pakistan. We stayed there for four months, then got on another boat, to Mombasa, Africa. Then we boarded a train, first to Nairobi, then to Uganda, where we lived in a Polish settlement camp on Lake Victoria. We stayed here for over five years. They built schools for us, and we were treated well here. When the war ended, we went back to Poland. We heard our father had somehow made his way to England. So we went there to join him. We stayed there for three years, until about 1952, when we decided to make a new life in America. We had a sponsor who lived in Indiana, and we made the long trip, on the Queen Elizabeth, landing on Ellis Island. We took a Greyhound bus to Hammond, Indiana, and my father got a job as a welder. When I got older, I found work as a draftsman for the telephone company. In 1957, I was drafted into the U.S. Army, and I was sent to Washington, D.C., as a tech engineer. I was discharged in 1959, and I went back to work for the telephone company. Back then, the solid-state transistor radio was becoming popular, and my manager allowed me to experiment on the devices. I developed a few patents and got promoted. In 1972, I got a call to come to Houston to work for an oil rig company, doing their electronics systems. I would come down here to San Leon to fish, and I liked it very much. I had a small shrimp boat back then, and I made some money doing it on the side. In 1975, this marina came

up for sale, and I bought it. At the time, I was also going to Ecuador for work, so I didn't focus too much on this property. In 1983, I started to be here more full-time. I bought a fleet of shrimp boats, and we did that business for a while. When I built this restaurant, it was just a small place that served the seafood we would catch from the bay. Then, in 2008, Hurricane Ike took it all away. We rebuilt the restaurant, and now my son runs the show here, and it is doing very well."

I'm trying to keep eye contact with him while madly scribbling. I ask him about the gold anchor around his neck. His wife got it for him a long time ago.

"I'll tell you a funny story about my wife," he says. "When I was in the U.S. Army, some friends set us up on a blind date because we were both Polish. We started talking on that first date, and wouldn't you know it, we had lived in all the same places at the same time. Our families knew each other, and I had actually met her once when she was just eight days old. Her family had been on the same journey as mine. She was in Siberia when I was there, she went across the Caspian Sea to Iran, and she lived in the same camp in Africa when I was there. She came to the United States a year after I did. When we were dating, I showed her a picture I had kept from Africa. There was a man who had killed a great crocodile, and all the kids in the camp surrounded the animal to take pictures. I showed her the picture, and wouldn't you know it, she was in the picture."

He grows quiet for a brief moment. "There was a reason for all this, for meeting my wife. I am blessed. Too many times I should not have made it out alive. Now I have my own family, and I feel like it was all for a purpose. I am eighty-three, and no question I have lived a blessed life."

My hand is cramping from writing so fast, my fingers trembling. I ask him where he keeps that picture of the man with the crocodile. He tells me he lost it during Ike. Like everyone here, he lost almost everything.

"Well, this was much more than I intended on saying," he tells me. "I think you only wanted to know about my restaurant."

I put down my pen and close my notebook. There is nothing more to write. I shake hands with him and wish him a healthy life. He seems tired from talking. His phone rings as he gets up to leave the table. I watch him as he walks around his restaurant, shaking hands with customers and wiping down a stained menu. Through the glass walls of the restaurant, I watch him go back to the marina, where he helps a fisherman bring his boat out of the water. A brown pelican sits perched on a rock, patiently waiting for the scraps to be thrown its way.

I don't know what these various cultures have in common other than the bay that provides them work and, I assume, some deeper satisfaction of living. And hot sauce—they all seem to like hot sauce. As Kenny said, when you're on the water, the rules of the land don't apply. It's as if you get to leave the planet for a while. Other problems arise on a boat, but they are mechanical or else involve battles with weather or annoying gulls. For most of the fishermen I talked to, the biggest problem is that the laws of the land have slowly but heavily crept onto the boats in the water, making that sweet journey of escape barely possible anymore.

In 2017, Hurricane Harvey battered the Gulf Coast, leaving most of the coastal towns in devastating floodwaters. It was the worst storm since Ike. But the folks on the coast will rebuild. From the shrimp trawlers to the Mexican cooks to Captain Wally, they will return to their bond with the water; they will once again harvest their livelihoods from the bay.

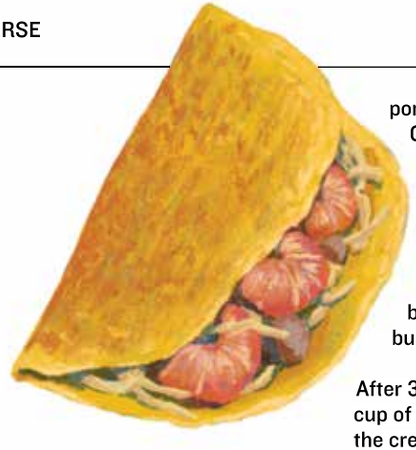
Shrimpers are squeezed all around by the cost of operating a boat in the United States, the cost of meeting regulations, and competition with low-price, low-quality shrimp from Asia. The price of shrimp has become so cheap that we have devalued the flavor of shrimp. We think of it as an everyday food that we consume without a second thought. But if you like shrimp, you should get your hands on some Galveston Bay white shrimp. The boats never go out for more than a day, so the shrimp don't get frozen. They come in fresh and are sold right away. They are delicate and taste of the bay. You will find that you don't need to blacken them or bury them in a blanket of sauce. And you'll know what the pelican knows: that shrimp are best eaten fresh and simply prepared.

# VIETNAMESE CREPES WITH SHRIMP, PORK, AND HERBS

## (Banh Xeo with Nuoc Cham)

*Banh xeo is a traditional Vietnamese stuffed crepe dish, served with lettuce and herbs on the side. You wrap the crepe in lettuce and dip it into the sauce known as nuoc cham. But for this version, I serve the crepes open-faced, with the lettuce and herbs on top. Serve this as a casual first course along with a crisp light beer.*

SERVES 4 AS A FIRST COURSE



### BATTER

- **2 cups rice flour**
- **2 tablespoons plus scant ¼ teaspoon ground turmeric**
- **1 teaspoon cornstarch**
- **1 teaspoon salt**
- **½ scallion, thinly sliced**
- **⅓ cup coconut milk**
- **2 cups water**

### FILLING

- **1½ teaspoons fish sauce**
- **½ teaspoon sugar**
- **½ teaspoon salt**
- **⅛ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**
- **12 ounces pork shoulder, sliced into thin strips**
- **12 ounces small shrimp, preferably white Gulf shrimp**
- **½ small yellow onion, thinly sliced**
- **¼ cup vegetable oil**
- **2 cups bean sprouts, rinsed**

### GARNISH

- **1 grapefruit, cut into suprêmes, juice reserved (see Nuoc Cham recipe)**
- **1 bunch mint, roughly chopped**
- **1 bunch cilantro**
- **1 bunch Thai basil, chopped**
- **1 cup chopped romaine lettuce**
- **Nuoc Cham (recipe follows)**

To make the batter: In a medium bowl, combine the rice flour, cornstarch, salt, turmeric, and scallion. Add the coconut milk and water and whisk well. Set aside at room temperature for 1 hour. The batter will thicken slightly as it sits.

Meanwhile, marinate the pork for the filling: In a small bowl, combine the fish sauce, sugar, salt, and pepper. Add the pork, tossing to coat, cover, and refrigerate.

When ready to cook, drain the pork and divide the pork, shrimp, and onion into 4 portions each.

Heat a 10-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add 2 teaspoons of the oil to the pan, then add one portion each of the pork, shrimp, and onion and sauté for about 1 minute, stirring often, until the pork is slightly browned. Give the batter a good stir with a ladle, pour about ⅓ cup of the batter into the center of the skillet, and swirl the skillet to cover the bottom; the batter should sizzle and bubble as you pour it in.

After 30 seconds, pile ½ cup of the bean sprouts onto the crepe, lower the heat to medium, and place a lid on the pan. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes, until the sprouts have wilted slightly.

Remove the lid. Pour 1 teaspoon of the oil around the edges of the crepe and cook for 3 minutes more, or until the crepe is crispy and golden on the bottom. Slide the crepe onto a serving plate. Repeat with the remaining batter and filling, putting each crepe on a serving plate.

Arrange the grapefruit segments, herbs, and lettuce over the crepe—build the greens nice and high. Drizzle the nuoc cham sauce over the herbs and crepe. Serve immediately, with more nuoc cham on the side if you want.



# BOURBON NUOC CHAM–ROASTED OYSTERS

*Try to get lovely big, fat Gulf oysters for this recipe if you can. They aren't as briny as some other varieties, but they are juicy and they cook really nicely.*

*The oysters are topped with the same basic dipping sauce I serve with the crepes, but I replace the water with bourbon. It adds smokiness and depth to the sauce. When you cook with bourbon, you can't just substitute it in equal parts for water. You have to cook the alcohol out of the bourbon.*

SERVES 6 AS A FIRST COURSE

- **Rock salt**
- **12 oysters, preferably from the Gulf, scrubbed clean**
- **¼ cup Bourbon Nuoc Cham (recipe follows)**

Preheat the oven to 500°F, or as hot as it will go.

Spread a layer of rock salt on a baking sheet and nestle the oysters in the salt, with the flat sides facing up. Put the oysters in the oven and watch them carefully as they cook, as they will only take 3 to 5 minutes. As soon as the oysters start to open up and you see a small bit of the oyster liquor bubbling around the sides, they are ready. Take the oysters out of the oven.

Wearing heatproof gloves, lift each oyster and pop the top shells off; they should come off easily. (I don't even use an oyster knife for this, just a sturdy paring knife.)

Arrange the oysters on a serving plate and drizzle the bourbon nuoc cham right over the oysters. Serve immediately.

## NUOC CHAM

This is a great dipping sauce for spring rolls and lettuce wraps. The grapefruit juice is optional, but it really makes the sauce vibrant. *Makes about 1½ cups*

- **⅔ cup lukewarm water**
- **3 tablespoons sugar**
- **⅓ cup fresh lime juice**
- **5 to 6 tablespoons fish sauce**
- **1 or 2 Thai bird chiles, thinly sliced**
- **2 garlic cloves, minced**
- **Reserved juices from the grapefruit suprêmes (from the crepe recipe)**

In a small bowl, whisk together the water and sugar to dissolve the sugar. Add the lime juice, fish sauce, chiles, and garlic and whisk to combine. Add the reserved grapefruit juice.

## BOURBON NUOC CHAM

*Makes about 1 cup*

- **2 cups bourbon, preferably a 5-year-aged one**
- **3 tablespoons sugar**
- **⅓ cup fresh lime juice**
- **5 to 6 tablespoons fish sauce**
- **1 or 2 Thai bird chiles, thinly sliced**
- **2 garlic cloves, minced**

Put the bourbon in a medium pot, bring to a simmer over low heat, and simmer slowly until it has reduced to about ½ cup. The bourbon will ignite, so have a tight-fitting lid next to the stove, and do not ever peek into the pot. When the bourbon ignites, simply put the lid over the pot to put out the fire; remove the lid as soon as the fire is doused. The alcohol may ignite once or twice more; just cover the pot to extinguish the flames.

When the bourbon has reduced, pour it into a heatproof measuring cup, then add water until you have ⅔ cup reduced bourbon water.

Pour the bourbon water into a bowl and add the sugar, lime juice, fish sauce, chiles, and garlic. The nuoc cham will keep in your fridge, covered, for up to 2 weeks.