

Shrimp by Sarah Parkin in the Desert

“ Anyway, like I was sayin’, shrimp is the fruit of the sea. You can barbecue it, boil it, broil it, bake it, saute it. Dey’s uh, shrimp-kabobs, shrimp creole, shrimp gumbo. Pan fried, deep fried, stir-fried. There’s pineapple shrimp, lemon shrimp, coconut shrimp, pepper shrimp, shrimp soup, shrimp stew, shrimp salad, shrimp and potatoes, shrimp burger, shrimp sandwich. That— that’s about it.”

—*Bubba Blue, as played by Mykelti Williamson in the Academy Award winning movie, Forrest Gump*

Just as Forrest, as a child, never pictured himself shrimp farming in the movie, *Forrest Gump*, Gary Wood, an architect in Oklahoma City, never imagined he would end up farming shrimp in the Sonoran Desert. After nearly two decades of structure design as an architect in Oklahoma City, he found himself operating Desert Sweet Shrimp in Gila Bend, Arizona.

Most people who visit Gila Bend know it as an oasis on a long stretch of desert on the way to San Diego or Puerto Peñasco. The idea of a small family farm in Gila Bend isn't surprising. After all, agriculture is the town's mainstay. What surprises people is the fact that one of those operations farms shrimp. Here, in the southern half of Arizona, miles from any ocean, Desert Sweet Shrimp produces such high quality gourmet premium white shrimp, *Panaeais Vannamei*, that some of the finest restaurants in Arizona buy their shrimp from Desert Sweet. In fact, the company distributes shrimp to some of the finer restaurants in San Francisco and to the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago.

Gary Wood's family has owned a farm in Gila Bend since the 1950s. In the 1980s, Wood studied shrimp farming in Ecuador. "In 1983-84, we became involved in raising shrimp in Ecuador," said Wood. "While we were down there, we started observing a few things. One thing that caught our attention is during the monsoons, it rained so much that it pushed all of the salt out...the salinity of the water would basically drop down to what the water is here. And the shrimp did real well."

After that discovery, Woods and his family decided to experiment with shrimp farming in the desert. While they may have tried many different ways of preparing the shrimp for eating, just as Bubba did, the Woods family was also trying out different ways to successfully farm the shrimp. Wood's architectural background helped him to design the operation. Desert Sweet Shrimp began in 1995, with their first harvest in 1997. The farm soon grew to have 50 acres of shrimp ponds. The natural clay in the area provided excellent lining for the ponds. Machines that look like toy paddleboats aerate the water.

Unlike Forrest Gump on Bubba's shrimp boat, Desert Sweet Shrimp buys the stock larvae, or baby shrimp, in March. The vials received from Florida must meet Specific Pathogen Free (SPF) standards. Initially, the shrimp are difficult to see without a magnifying glass, but, according to Wood, they can triple in size every day.

The shrimp are placed in one of four protected 100-ton tanks where they can grow for about a month. At first, because they are so small, their most dangerous predator is the dragonfly. As the shrimp grow, they soon get large

enough to no longer interest the dragonflies, and then they're released to the ponds where they continue to grow. "We don't put any water into any of these ponds until right before we put the shrimp in," said Wood. "And when we do that, the shrimp have a head start on size over the dragonflies."

Desert Sweet Shrimp has found a way to grow healthy shrimp in the desert without the use of pesticides, hormones, preservatives, antibiotics, chemicals, or mercury. Because the quality of the water is controlled, the iodine levels are low, and the shrimp have a sweeter taste. They are fed pellet food and algae that grows in the ponds. They also eat algae, dragonfly larvae, and mosquitoes.

Unlike shrimp farms near salt water, or Forrest Gump's shrimp boat, the Arizona heat kills the majority of bacteria that would grow in other climates. "Here, isolated like we are, with this tremendous heat that we have, and you know you have to understand that Gila Bend is one of the hottest places around, it kills most of the germs," said Wood. "We don't really have anything that would convey germs from the ocean to here."

While many shrimp farms face criticism for the destruction of the environment, Desert Sweet Shrimp is extremely conscious to care for the environment. The staff received assistance from the University of Texas and Texas A&M aqua farming experts to develop ecologically sound methods for growing freshwater shrimp. Scientists found the conditions at Desert Sweet Shrimp produced shrimp with increased size and weight. Forrest Gump would surely have found it impressive.

"Shrimp are extremely sensitive to temperature. They like the heat," said Wood. They like it when it's 115 degrees out there. But they don't like the cold. When the temperature gets around 55 degrees, they start to die. That means that we have to take the shrimp out of the ponds by mid-October." The season for shrimp farming is March to October. After seven months, they are ready for harvest. Within minutes of harvesting the shrimp from the ponds, employees pack them in ice to provide the freshest shrimp available.

When they harvest all the shrimp, the water from the ponds irrigates other parts of the farm where they grow alfalfa and olive trees. This could not happen with saltwater shrimp farms, as the salt would kill the crops. Just like Bubba and Forrest, Wood can list multiple ways to prepare the shrimp. He can also list ways to use the olives from his olive groves, including the olive oil pressed from the olives.

During the season, Desert Sweet Shrimp offers tours of the farm. While giving tours isn't the main portion of their business, the farm tours keep them busy. "Sometimes we'll get a couple hundred in one day."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DESERT SWEET SHRIMP



Much of the shrimp purchased in the United States comes from China. Some restaurants and retailers operate on such a narrow margin it forces them to choose cost over quality. However, if you order shrimp at a high-end restaurant, you may be eating shrimp raised at Desert Sweet Shrimp.

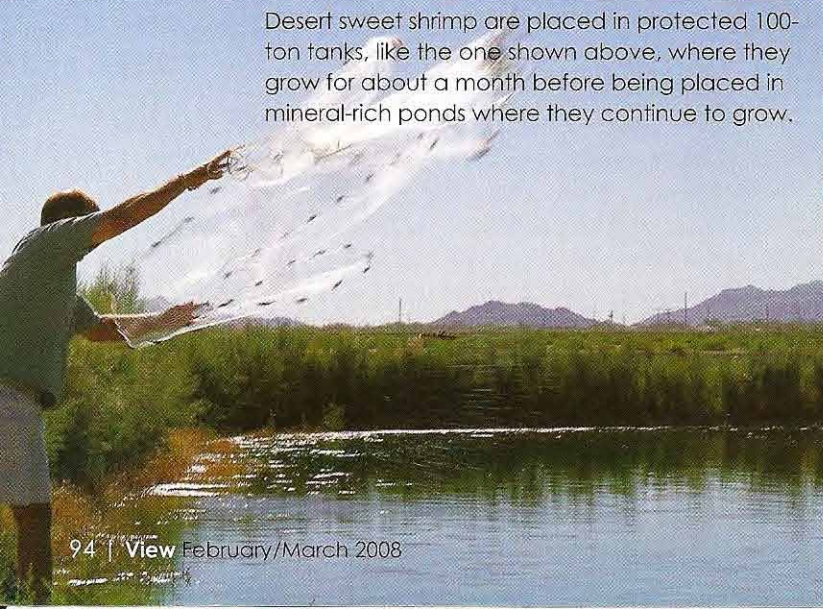
“We sell to the very best restaurants around and we also sell to environmental groups and aquariums,” said Wood. The Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, and several of the other aquariums around the United States, buy shrimp from us to show that they support sustainable and ecologically friendly farming.”

“We have big users in San Francisco” he continued. “Especially restaurants that want to be eco-friendly.” When referring to restaurants in the Phoenix area, Woods said some of the restaurants they supply are the Bon Appétit Restaurants, Lon’s at the Hermosa Inn, Daniel’s and all the Intel locations.

The majority of the business takes place through the website or over the phone, and shrimp is available to buy at the farm. Woods said they ship anywhere in the United States, from Hawaii to New York. In Arizona, they can deliver via FedEx Ground. “That’s one-day delivery guaranteed for about 5 or 6 dollars. Cheaper than the gas to go to the grocery store for some people. It goes straight to the home or house and is waiting on the doorstep when the person gets home at night.” The shrimp is packed in an ice chest with dry ice so it will last a couple of days.

Desert Sweet Shrimp has become such a part of Gila Bend, Arizona, that the town presents an annual shrimp festival, including a Shrimp Festival Queen, shrimp cook-offs, entertainment, and even “Bobbing for Shrimp” in cocktail sauce. Perhaps some year, Forrest Gump will make an appearance, giving out some of Bubba’s suggestions for preparation.

Desert sweet shrimp are placed in protected 100-ton tanks, like the one shown above, where they grow for about a month before being placed in mineral-rich ponds where they continue to grow.



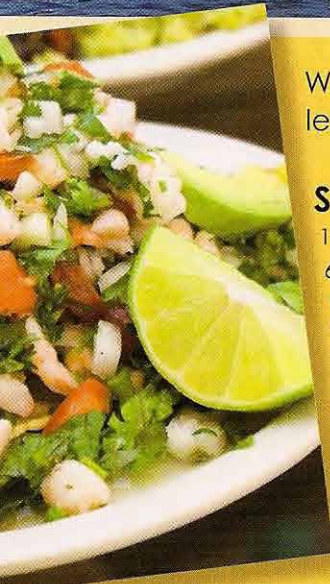
Directions: From Highway 8 in Gila Bend, take Old Highway 80 north to mile marker 5 and watch for the signs. If you are heading south on Highway 85, head west on Woods Road for about 1 mile when you reach Old Highway 80. Head south on 80 until you reach mile marker 5 and watch for signs.

If you wish to buy shrimp on the farm or for tours, call **602-768-6281**. If you have orders, questions, or comments, call **623-393-0136**.

Website: www.desertsweetshrimp.com
Email: shrimp@desertsweetshrimp.com



PHOTO COURTESY OF DESERT SWEET SHRIMP



While Desert Sweet Shrimp is excellent served with some cocktail sauce or a little lemon and olive oil, here are a couple additional recipes to add to Bubba's list:

SHRIMP CEVICHE [Serves 8]

- 1 lb of Desert Sweet Shrimp
- 6-8 Lemons (Juice of Lemons)
- 1 lb Tomatoes - 1/4 Inch Diced
- 1/4 Cup of Celery - Finely Diced
- 1 or 2 Jalapenos - Small Diced
- 1/2 Cup of Red Onion - Finely Diced
- 2 Tablespoons Minced Garlic
- 2 Tablespoons Chopped Cilantro
- 1/4 Teaspoon Black Pepper
- 1 Tablespoon Salt

Thaw shrimp under cool running water, drop into boiling water for 1-2 minutes. Place in ice water, remove and mince. Mix the above ingredients and chill for 3-4 hours before serving. Goes great with fresh corn chips or on a tostada shell topped with sliced avocado.

DESERT SWEET SHRIMP BUTTER

- 1/2 lb. minced Desert Sweet Shrimp
- 1 lb. cream cheese
- 1/2 cup chopped chives
- 1/2 lb. unsalted butter
- 1 tsp. granulated garlic
- 1/2 tsp. black pepper
- Salt to taste

In a 10" saucepan, melt butter on low heat. Add garlic once butter has melted. Turn up the heat and let the butter get hot. Toss in the shrimp and sauté for approximately 1 1/2 minutes. Drain and save butter. Mince shrimp. Place cream cheese and remaining ingredients in a mixing bowl. Mix until shrimp and butter are evenly mixed. Refrigerate for an hour to cool before serving. Serve with your favorite bread, bagel, or crackers.

