

## Georgia Shrimpers Embrace a Pesky Ocean Creature that China Loves

'It's a particularly unsexy ingredient'



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Champ Warren stands ankle deep in jellyfish on board the Blessed Assurance off the coast of Georgia. Warren, a deckhand, and Capt. Grovea Simpson, right, both residents of Darien, Ga., found they can make more money catching cannonball jellies in a few hours than spending a week at sea in pursuit of the elusive Georgia white shrimp. Rick Loomis for Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

The Boone family made their living shrimping along the Georgia coast for generations. As Greg Boone tells it, his granddaddy and his cousins constructed a 45-foot boat and floated down the Altamaha River to Darien, where he built a commercial shrimp boat dock. The Boones have fished there ever since.

But shrimpers are endangered. There were once as many as 1,500 shrimp boats off the Georgia coast, but this season, only 200 registered with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources — a third of which were out-of-state vessels.

Shrimpers like Boone had to get creative. In Georgia, that means harvesting jellyfish.

“You have to be a businessman to survive [as a shrimper],” said Julie Califf, a marine biologist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. “You have to think about the market and regulations. Insurance is more expensive, and the price of shrimp has not risen, even if corrected for inflation. You have to be able to juggle all of that and plan for lean and fat times of year.”

Part of that business equation for Boone has been harvesting *Stomolophus meleagris*, or cannonball jellyfish, for almost two decades. In China and elsewhere in Asia, jellyfish bells are braised or sliced into springy, noodle-like strands tossed in some variation of soy, vinegar, sesame oil, and chiles — sometimes with scallions or cilantro. Lucas Sin, chef of Junzi Kitchen in New York and Cambridge, Massachusetts, is of northern Chinese heritage and grew up in Hong Kong. “Jellyfish is traditionally served as a banquet dish, which is to say when you’re eating jellyfish at a wedding or celebration it signals opulence,” he said. “Opulence in banquet cooking often comes from texture, and jellyfish has an interesting texture.”

For generations of Georgia shrimpers, jellyballs, as they’re locally known, had been nothing more than a nuisance. Boone’s father, Sinkey, even invented a device — the Georgia Jumper or jellyball shooter — to exclude them from his nets.

But when Terry Chuang came to town and launched Golden Island International in 2002 to process Georgia’s jellyfish for the Asian market, the Boone fleet was the first to sign on, get new nets, and convert its boats for jellyballing.

By volume, cannonball jellyfish make up Georgia's third-largest fishery behind shrimp and blue crabs. It's also the least understood. "Historically, jellyfish have been ignored. They were never deemed important," said Lucas Brotz, a cnidaria scientist and honorary research associate at the University of British Columbia. According to Brotz, marine biology generally is split into two major camps: scientists who study fish and scientists who study plankton (i.e., fish food). "Jellyfish has slipped through the cracks a bit," he said.

As the only American jellyfish processor currently in operation, Golden Island International has also worked hard to distinguish itself from its South and Central American competitors, who operate in countries and communities with few, if any, regulations. In addition to a high-tech water treatment system, the company uses a lower ratio of alum than the industry standard, which has been cited around 10 percent, according to April Harper, the company's plant manager. Alum is essential to giving jellyfish its signature tendon-like crunch, but in excess, it's harmful to your health. Soaking and rinsing jellyfish before cooking eliminates almost all alum from the product, but Harper said they've had to overcome the stigma of jellyfish processed elsewhere.

Jellyfish are pretty nutritionally neutral. They're essentially water and collagen with few calories and nutrients and no flavor. Harper is optimistic about their adoption into the American diet and is working with Georgia chefs to add them to their menus, but it will be a long road.

"I don't think Red Lobster is picking it up soon," said Barton Seaver, a sustainable seafood expert, educator, and author. "It's a

particularly unsexy ingredient. [Americans] are specifically told from day one to avoid jellyfish. There's a lot working against it from a cultural standpoint.”

Although they have distributors in New York City and Atlanta, the vast majority of Golden Island International's product is shipped to Asia and, specifically, China. The trade war hasn't yet hampered their sales. “Our biggest challenge is that there isn't enough research on jellyfish,” Harper said.

What we do know is that Georgia jellyballs are a clean fishery with very little by-catch. That shooter invented by Sinkey Boone also happened to keep leatherback sea turtles out of his nets, and it's now used worldwide and known as a turtle excluder device.

“I applaud the Georgia fishery, especially compared to Mexico and others in the Americas. They haven't expanded dramatically or too quickly. There are some peer-reviewed scientific articles, and they're collecting real data on by-catch,” Brotz said.

There's more we don't know, like how many jellyfish spawn and grow off the coast of Georgia. No one is studying their impact on the larger ecosystem, and no one is quite sure why their numbers explode one year and dramatically retreat the next.

In 2015, its best year, Golden Island International processed 15 million pounds of jellyballs; an average year is more like 5 million to 7 million pounds, according to Harper. Shrimpers accept the fluctuations just as they do hurricanes, freezes, and diesel prices. “We'll never really figure the ocean out,” Boone said.

There's evidence that jellyfish populations have flourished from human activity and climate change in certain parts of the world. Major factors include the introduction of jellyfish into new waters as invasive species; expanded territory and longer seasons in warmer waters; and the elimination of competition and predators as finfish are overfished. Jellyfish have lower oxygen needs than most marine life and can survive in dead zones; and coastal development, including oil rigs and aquaculture facilities, provide an ideal habitat for the polyp phase of the jellyfish life cycle.

However, [reports of jellyfish-clogged nuclear plants](#) and hyperbolic headlines ("[Hope you like to eat jellyfish, because they're taking over the oceans](#)") don't apply universally to ecosystems. In Georgia, there is no scientific or even anecdotal evidence that jellyfish are any more or less abundant than they were 100 or 1,000 years ago. No one in Georgia really paid attention until they were commercially viable.

Late fall through mid-spring, jellyballs make for easy, profitable fishing. Compared to shrimping, where boats leave for days or weeks at a time, a vessel's dock-to-dock trip is 14 to 30 hours. Once shrimpers locate a jellyball bloom, most often in federal waters, they drop their nets into the ocean for 5 to 20 minutes and bring up 8,000 to 12,000 pounds per drag. "I've seen drags for 5 minutes, and it's too long. You would count to 10, and there would be 30,000 pounds of jellyballs," said Wynn Gale, a boat captain who's currently out of the water and selling shrimp from his yellow truck at the Friendly Express Station in downtown Darien. Once, Gale filled up his entire boat in a record four and a half hours.

Because the nets have wider holes and don't typically drag the ocean floor, jellyballing uses far less fuel than shrimping. Jellyballs don't need to be iced down like shrimp, and they naturally roll from the nets into the hull of the ship. "With jellyballs, the crew is

on deck 10 minutes for every drag. On a shrimp boat, you're on back deck for hours, picking the shrimp, heading them, and icing them down. It takes an hour or two every drag," Gale said.

Working just a month or two jellyballing, Boone earns a quarter to a third of his annual revenue. For about 30 hours of work, Boone estimates he makes \$8,000 in profit from jellyballing and no more than \$5,000 for shrimp, even though they command around 7 cents and \$5 a pound, respectively. Each haul is around 67,000 to 120,000 pounds, according to Harper. "Some of the boats are so packed, they look like lowriders coming into the docks," said Bryan Fluech, associate director of marine extension for the University of Georgia Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant.

The vast majority of that weight disappears down the drain — albeit a highly regulated drain that captures as much protein, sand, and solids as possible. Jellyfish are about 96 percent water and lose three-quarters of their mass when cured.

After Golden Island International workers manually separate the more desirable bell from the oral arms, they wash the jellyfish to remove mucus and sand, and then separately cure the parts for seven to 14 days in a mixture of salt and 1 percent alum.

Until recently, the entire process took place in downtown Darien. Shrimp boats sidled up to Golden Island International's docks and a giant vacuum sucked the jellyballs from boats' hulls directly to its processing facility. It was one of the first buildings that visitors and residents saw as they drove into town over the Darien River Bridge. Depending on the season, they could smell it, too. "The smell is repugnant," Gale said.

This November, Golden Island International is scheduled to open a new, larger facility in the county, just beyond I-95 and Darien's

shuttered outlet malls. [The City of Darien and McIntosh County worked on a deal with Chuang](#) to repurpose a retired shoe factory.

In the plant's original location, a three-story luxury condo is rising and set to be completed this December. Retail, an adjacent restaurant, and a 50-room hotel will follow. City officials envision Darien as a residential community, attractive to retirees and tourists. "Our total comprehensive plan is based on tourism. What we have in Darien is really unparalleled. There's a vast expanse of marshland, sport fishing, and access to trails and birding," said Tim Sweezey, Darien's city manager. There's also a wine bar, a number of cute Airbnbs, a specialty food shop, dockside restaurants, and a walkable downtown.

Shrimpers may be the heart of Darien's identity, but it's unlikely they're the economic future.

"In Georgia in the past 10 years, when you look at how much shrimp is landed, there's been a 38 percent drop. But when you look at the effort and number of people going out, that's dropped by 70 percent," Fluech said. "Fishermen and vessels are getting older, and we're not replacing them. When the next generation comes up, it's easier for them to sell coastal property to a marina or condo."

It's a complex dance for this rural community, its fishermen, and Golden Island International. Opening the new facility has taken more time than anticipated, and at the beginning of the 2019 season, before the build-out is complete and certified, it will process jellyballs in limited quantities from a small building 10-plus miles out of town. But with the new plant, Harper anticipates increasing capacity and profit for the five or so boats that catch Golden Island International's supply.

The jellyball industry has room to grow, as does the science behind it, and any proclamations that jellyfish are the next miracle cure or important sustainable food source overlook the significance of the fishery in Georgia. Golden Island International is a job creator in the rural South, and the annual jellyball harvest is a lifeline for shrimpers.

Greg Boone started shrimping at 11. Of his six children, Michael Boone is the only one who has taken up his father's line of work so far. As a kid, Michael stood on a milk crate to drive his dad's boat and has been jellyballing since he was 14. In recent years, one of Boone's youngest daughters has joined him shrimping, and based on her exceptional work heading shrimp alongside a crew of salty men, she also shows promise as a boat captain.

"It's not a dying industry. It's a dying population in this country. Shrimpers do well — those who want to work," Boone said.

Jellyballing helps keep shrimping and its culture of honest work alive and profitable. "Fishermen," said Seaver, "are nature's most adaptive creatures."

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Link: <https://heated.medium.com/shrimpers-in-georgia-are-embracing-a-pesky-ocean-creature-that-china-loves-a6a079ebb209>