

Got Shrimp?

Three Down East seafood restaurants hook patrons with fresh food and family-style atmosphere.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

The North Carolina coast draws many Tar Heel residents to its shoreline every summer. And one of the many reasons is to get a taste of some of the best seafood anywhere. Here are three Down East restaurants that have been pleasing palates — season after season, year after year, generation after generation.

Sam & Omie's • Nags Head

A solitary figure walks along the beach as the sun edges up offshore. The only sounds are footsteps on damp sand and the distant squawking of unseen gulls. Without breaking stride, the walker turns her head when a familiar smell triggers her senses. A break in the dunes reveals a modest, cedar-shingled, one-story building. As she gets closer, clattering plates and hearty conversation can be heard. A small sign, swinging on its rusty chain, proclaims “Sam & Omie’s.”

Just as it has done every season since opening on June 5, 1937, the Nags Head seafood landmark still draws people in search of a plate of shrimp and eggs. The cottage-styled structure hasn’t changed much over the years — the parking lot is still beach sand, the weathered screen door still squeaks and slams behind you, and a light layer of sand still peppers the hardwood floors inside.

Oversized photographs of blue marlin and tuna catches cover the walls. Ceiling fans spin lazily above. The aroma of seafood sizzling on the grill overwhelms your senses. Pitchers of cold beer and sweet tea rest on vinyl-covered tables. Men, wearing faded ball caps decorated with fishing hooks, smile and laugh while dipping shrimp in homemade sauces. The wait staff bustles throughout carrying platters of steaming food.

Teresa Merritt ushered me to the large, round, “family” table next to the busy kitchen entrance. From there I could see half the restaurant and enjoyed a wonderful, unobstructed view of the Atlantic. Merritt and her partner Carol Sikes have been co-owners since 1987; Merritt started by waiting tables. “Like many of us here, I came — and I stayed,” she says.

Merritt says she and Sikes wanted to maintain the landmark restaurant to preserve “how it used to be — family and fishing.” Back in 1937, Sam & Omie’s originated charter boat fishing in Nags Head, and “people used to come in, order a meal, then reserve a charter boat to fish offshore.” She points to a small stained glass window near the kitchen that served as the boat charter office before the kitchen was enlarged.

But tradition isn’t confined to the restaurant; it also refers to the people who make it happen — the staff. Merritt says the least-tenured employee, so to speak, is a 10-year

veteran. “Our people stay, and our customers like that,” she says. “One of our servers, Dolly Jones, has been with us for 20 years.”

Head Chef C.W. Lee stopped by for lunch 23 years ago. After lunch and after mentioning his prior kitchen experience in Florida, he was asked to “help out” for the afternoon. He stayed. Lee’s specialty is She Crab soup. “I make six gallons a day, and it goes quickly — a cup at a time,” he smiles.

During the summer months, the restaurant, which seats 65, serves between 600 and 900 meals a day, from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m. They close from mid-December to March to regroup and recharge.

The menu includes steamed shrimp, clams, and crab legs; fried oysters and shrimp; marinated tuna and local catches; scratch-made crab cakes; as well as prime rib, fried chicken, homemade desserts, and, of course, their famous “Clam Dogs,” — a frankfurter roll with fried clam strips and made-from-scratch tartar or cocktail sauce.

Sam & Omie’s
7228 South Virginia Dare Trail
Nags Head, N.C. 27959
(252) 441-7366
Open daily, 7 a.m.-10 p.m.

Sanitary Fish Market – Morehead City

“You meet someone you know every time you walk in,” says Judge Carr, from Durham. Carr, his wife Muff, and cousin Amy were introduced to me on a recent visit to the Sanitary Fish Market Restaurant. Why would a family from Durham expect to meet people they knew in a waterfront restaurant so far from home? Easy. “I’ve been coming here since I was born,” Carr says.

Barely a year after Sam & Omie’s opened their doors in 1937, Captain Tony Seamon and Ted Garner opened the Sanitary Fish Market. And 65 years later, the well-known restaurant continues to draw “schools” of customers from near and far. Morehead City, the bustling and vibrant waterfront community, is a favorite vacation destination for many Tar Heel and out-of-state residents. The Crystal Coast is nearby, as is historic Beaufort. Sand, surf, and sun generate larger-than-normal appetites. The antidote lies along Bogue Sound, surrounded by a small armada of offshore charter fishing boats.

“Families on vacation look forward to a home-cooked seafood dinner, and we do our best to provide that for them,” says manager John Tunnell. And they most certainly do — to the tune of 800 pounds of shrimp, 70 gallons of scallops, 70 gallons of oysters, and countless filets and steaks of fresh seafood — each week. The restaurant that originally seated 12 (at bar stools) currently seats more than 650. And people don’t mind waiting a

bit for a table, says Tunnell. “They line up outside, and when I greet them I always — always — get a smile.” That’s a lot of smiles, since the affable manager has worked at the restaurant for 58 years, beginning his career bussing tables.

Another senior staff member is David West, kitchen manager. West has been with the restaurant for more than 32 years. He could easily be cast as a jovial charter boat skipper, sporting a peppered beard. “During the summer season, we can serve 2,000 meals a day,” he says. How does he handle that sort of kitchen choreography? “We use two-way radios,” he laughs.

As Tunnell and I chatted in one of the large wood-floored dining rooms overlooking the Sound, he ticked off the list of employees who have been working for him over the years — and their respective family members who also work for him. Collectively, they could form a major league baseball team. “We’re a family here — some of us have gone away to college for a while, but most come back,” he says. Just like customers.

When entering the restaurant, a rogue’s gallery of sorts greets hungry patrons. A narrow, paneled hallway testifies to the history; photos from floor to ceiling — enough for a modest museum — trace the eatery’s lineage. Among the who’s who of patrons: Every North Carolina governor since 1941, sports and music celebrities, and even former president George Bush.

Second-generation owner Ted Garner has recently semi-retired to turn the helm over to his son, Jeff, noting, “I promised my family I’d take it easy when I reached 60 — so I have; I just bought a Harley-Davidson.” He says he thinks he knows why his establishment has endured for so long in an industry known for short engagements. “People want good food, good-sized portions, and they like seeing the same faces year after year. That’s what we have always tried to give them.”

The Sanitary Fish Market Restaurant

501 Evans Street

Morehead City, N.C. 28557

(252) 247-3111

Open for lunch and dinner every day, February through November.

River Forest Manor – Belhaven

Down East seafood traditions aren’t limited to Nags Head and Morehead City. River Forest Manor, the Victorian Mansion-turned-restaurant and inn, has become a favorite for those traveling to Ocracoke via the Swan Quarter ferry and for those cruising the Intracoastal Waterway. Folks have been stopping here for fresh seafood (and land-based delicacies) for a long time — 57 years to be exact.

The mansion was built in 1899 by John Aaron Wilkinson, a lumber and railroad executive, and the site he chose is breathtaking. The mansion rests on the banks of the Pantego Creek — where the sunsets rival those in Key West, Florida.

In 1947, Axson Smith, originally from Belhaven, purchased the Victorian mansion from its second owner, J.W. Hines. Smith's wartime (WWII) food management experience and post-war hotel management experience gave him the tools he needed to return to Beaufort County and turn the private residence into a restaurant and inn.

Smith's original vision was to operate a hunting lodge. "My father would lease thousands of acres out in the county and attract hunters from across the country," says Axson Smith Jr., who currently runs the business with his brother Mark and his mother, Melba Smith. Over time, the emphasis turned toward a more traditional restaurant, inn, and marina. "My father taught me all he knew about the business," Smith says, "and that was considerable." He once asked his father how he came to name the mansion. "Dad told me he was upstairs one evening, and all he could see was the river and the forest."

Boaters find the location convenient; it's roughly halfway between Virginia and Beaufort. The River Forest Marina is a full-service facility — it offers fuel, engine repairs, haul-outs, and overnight dockage. "Almost a third of our visitors come by boat," says Smith. "We've had mariners from as far away as Europe and Australia. You never know who you might meet here. And they all love to share their experiences."

But location alone doesn't guarantee success for a restaurant. The right people and the right menu are also requisites. One of those "right" people is Jane Warren, who greets both diners and overnight guests with a generous smile. She was born and raised just across Pantego Creek. "I've worked here for about 15 years," she says, "and I really enjoy my work. I get to meet so many people from so many places."

At the heart of the restaurant, you'll find Alice Moore, head chef. Moore has been working her magic at the Manor for more than 42 years, and she and her staff are renowned for their smorgasbord that on most evenings offers 75 choices. Shrimp, clams, oysters, and fresh local catches are usually found on the table, as well as traditional meat and poultry specialties. Moore is most proud of her oyster fritters.

Since Beaufort County is the largest crab-processing county in the state, one can be assured of a delightful sampling of crab cakes. "Our crabs are so good, Baltimore has become our county's biggest customer," she says. Moore is also proud of the shrimp she marinates, cooks, and serves — fresh and right off the boat.

Moore agrees that the people of an establishment can make the difference between success and failure. "Our customers get here what they may not be getting much of anywhere else today — true, old-fashioned southern hospitality. Once you're here with us, you're always family."

Dorothy Gunn, assistant manager of the restaurant, echoes that sentiment. "That's what I hear time and time again," she says. "When I go home, I know I've done something to make someone come back." Gunn also feels there is something special about River Forest Manor that brings people back year after year. "Stop a minute. Look and listen," she says.

I do. What I hear are distant laughing gulls and the breeze slipping between lofty branches. “It doesn’t get much better than this,” she says. I agree.

River Forest Manor
600 East Main Street
Belhaven, N.C. 27810
(252) 943-2121 or (800) 346-2151
Open daily for dinner and on Sunday for brunch.

Bryan A. Oesterreich, teaching English at Beaufort County Community College and Eastern Carolina University, makes his home in Washington.