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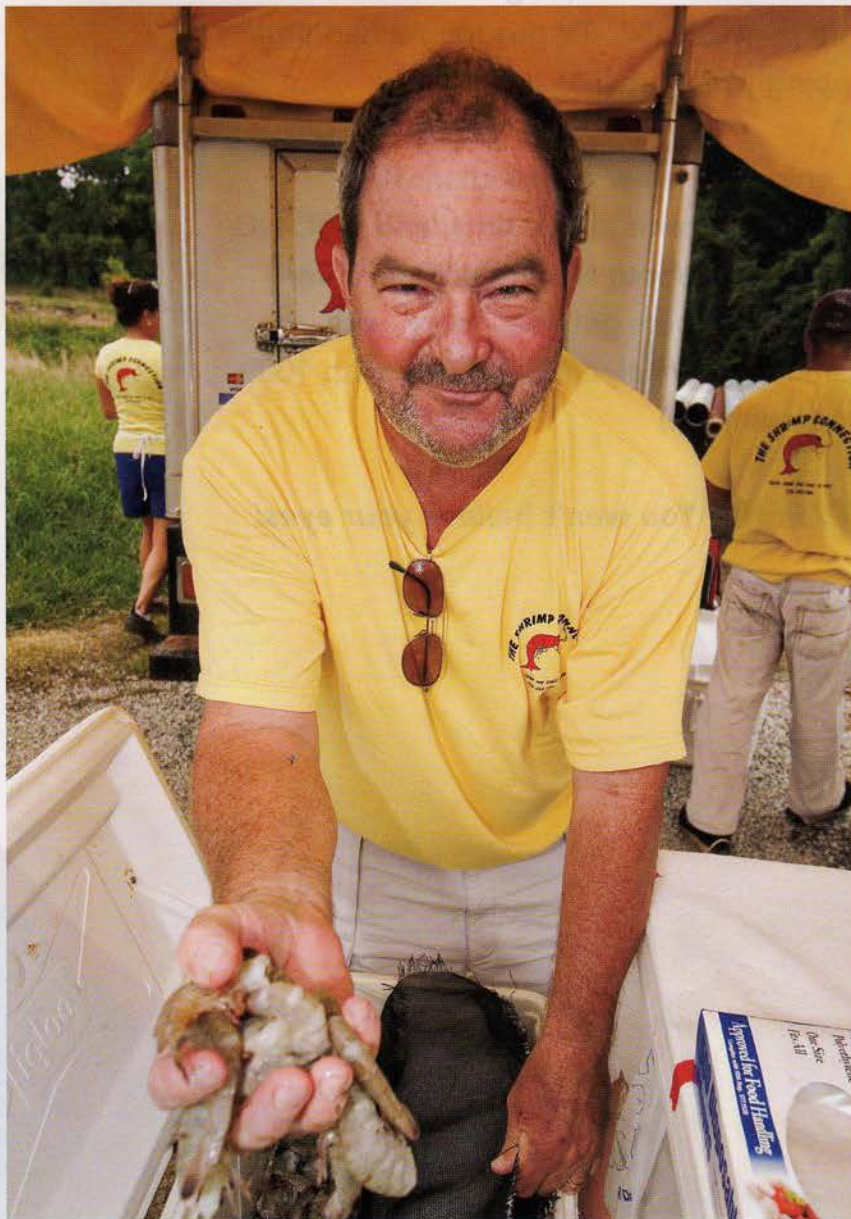


Tar Heel People

Seafood Specialist

For seven years, Landon Wilder has brought a taste of the coast to the North Carolina Piedmont from his refrigerated truck.

BY CHRIS GIGLEY



There isn't much to Landon Wilder's seafood operation. The Shrimp Connection is just a little refrigerated truck filled with coolers and a yellow tent set up by the side of the road. But that truck and tent are a beacon for Piedmont-based seafood connoisseurs who know Wilder sells the freshest fish and shellfish they can buy without going to the coast and catching it themselves.

Wilder, who lives in High Point, has brought a taste of the coast to central North Carolina since 2001. He's open for business just three days — Friday, Saturday, and Sunday — and doesn't have a permanent storefront. But it doesn't matter. His regular customers always find him.

"Uh-oh, hide all the soft shell crab," says Wilder on a blazing hot afternoon in Colfax, where he parks his truck every Friday off West Market Street beside a drilling company. One of his regulars, a woman who grew up on the Outer Banks, is always a big spender when his weekly haul includes soft shell crabs.

"If I keep buying these crabs, I'm

When it comes to shrimp, scallops, and other seafood, it doesn't get much fresher than Wilder's roadside operation.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT PONZONI

going to start walking sideways,” she quips. She orders 10, plus some halibut, and assures Wilder he’ll see her again next week. This is how most transactions go. Most customers are like old friends coming to visit. There’s small talk and joking, questions are asked about family and friends in common, and discussions ensue about the fish and recipes.

For someone who hasn’t purchased seafood at The Shrimp Connection before, the first time feels like discovering a highly guarded secret only locals know about. And there’s no doubt the woman who bought the soft shell crabs would love to keep it that way.

Lifestyle change

Wilder got his start in food when he became involved with a now-defunct Raleigh steakhouse called Atlanta Station back in the ’70s. He doesn’t miss the restaurant lifestyle, and neither does his wife of 22 years, Susan, who handles the marketing duties at The Shrimp Connection.

She remembers their last restaurant job, operating a country diner north of High Point. “I worked nights, and he worked days, so one of us would always be there from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m.,” says Susan. “We basically passed each other on Highway 68. That was the most we ever saw of one another.”

Wilder was completely burned out but didn’t know what else to do. Then, one weekend, he visited Steve Webb, one of the owners of Atlanta Station, at his home in Sneads Ferry. Webb also started a local institution in Raleigh, Snoopy’s Hot Dogs & More, in 1978. He suggested Wilder try selling fresh shrimp in the Piedmont.

It was no coincidence Webb came up with that idea in Sneads

Ferry. The small town on the New River hosts a shrimp festival every August, and seafood companies there catch more than 385 tons of shrimp annually. Wilder liked the idea immediately. He knew it could be done, having seen one man sell shrimp for years at the farmer’s market in Raleigh.

“He had a trailer and a pickup with 20 to 30 coolers of heads-on shrimp, and over the course of the weekend he would sell out of everything,” says Wilder.

Wilder is picky. Seafood houses try to sell their oldest fish first, but he insists on buying what’s just been unloaded from the boats.

“I went through a lot of suppliers to find someone who respects the fact that we deal with radically fresh product,” he says. “If a guy has shrimp that’s been in a cooler for three days and shrimp that just came in this morning, I want the stuff that came in this morning. And I’ll pay a premium for it.”

Now Wilder makes just two



Folks can jump in line via cyberspace for the catch of the week thanks to Wilder’s weekly newsletter.

Freshness first

Wilder began driving his little refrigerated truck to the Atlantic every Thursday to find enough shrimp to sell back home over the weekend. “I used to have to run up and down the coast to find shrimp,” he recalls. “Sometimes it would take two days. I’d start at the end of Highway 70 and work my way north to Atlantic Beach and Beaufort. I’d try to pick some up in Sneads Ferry, but it wasn’t always available.”

stops — one in Sneads Ferry and one on Topsail Island — to get his seafood, and he has a driver accompany him. But he still has to wake up at 4 a.m. every Thursday to make it to the docks by 8:30. “We’ll be buying, cutting, packing, and loading seafood until around noon,” he says. “Then we’ll hit the road.”

Wilder tries to source as much seafood as he can from North Carolina, usually bringing back locally caught grouper, snapper,

flounder, and mahimahi. But he also works with importers in Florida and Massachusetts to offer his customers exotic items like Pacific halibut and Norwegian salmon.

Now that he's a passenger, Wilder spends the return trip writing his weekly email newsletter, "Shrimprnotes," which includes everything from commentary about maniac drivers to an ode to his little truck. The one constant is a price list and description of what he's bringing back that week.

"By the time I get to Raleigh, the newsletter is already sent out," he says. "When we get home now, all we have to do is process the orders that have come in. People can order by replying to the newsletter." When he pitches his yellow tent in Colfax

on Friday, up to one-third of his load from the coast is already spoken for. The rest of it usually goes quickly, and rare leftovers are donated to a shelter in High Point.

Delectably deceiving

In addition to his spot next to the drilling company, Wilder sets up in front of the Cheerwine bottling plant across from the Piedmont Triad Farmers Market every Saturday and Sunday.

Why not inside the farmer's market? "I did in the beginning. ... They wouldn't let me expand the menu past shrimp," says Wilder. "To keep going in this business, I knew I'd have to bring in fish, so I made a deal with Cheerwine and have been there ever since."

Wilder also has a spot in the Lake Norman area, where the South Iredell Lions Club in Mooresville allows him to set up shop in front of its building on Brawley School Road. "We're doing it on a small scale there like we started here," he says.

If Lake Norman turns out to be anything like Colfax, word-of-mouth will build a following right away. The feedback is always the same. Wilder's seafood tastes better than anything sold in local supermarkets.

"What we sell is probably 100 percent better than anything else you can get here," says Susan. "It's not treated with chemicals. What [Landon] picks up on Thursday could've been swimming in the ocean on Wednesday. You can't get much fresher than that."



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But what makes the shrimp, for instance, taste so much better than anything else? "There's a big difference in taste and texture," says Wilder. "The other stuff is watery looking and has no taste to it."

It's true. Wilder's jumbo shrimp has a rich, meaty flavor that's simply too good to be doctored with spices. That's why the best recipes for his products are the simplest ones. Right by Wilder's tent, a thick binder sits on a table full of condiments for sale. In it are various recipes he and Susan have either developed or tested themselves.

For his shrimp, he recommends "Johnny Earles' 'Barbecued' Shrimp," which is a pound of shrimp sauteed in butter, Worcestershire sauce, and fresh lemon juice.

"I know it looks easy, but serve it over pasta, and it's delicious," he says.

Once again, he's right. The recipe is simple but exceptional. Just like

The Shrimp Connection and its proprietor.

Chris Gigley lives in Greensboro.

if you're going

Wilder sells his seafood every week at the following locations:

9302 West Market Street
Colfax, N.C. 27235
Friday, noon-6 p.m.

Across from the Piedmont Triad
Farmers Market
Interstate 40, Exit 208
Colfax, N.C. 27235
Saturday, 9 a.m.- 6 p.m. and
Sunday at 1 p.m.

630 Brawley School Road
Mooresville, N.C. 28117
Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

For a link to Wilder's website, where you can sign up to receive his newsletter, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."



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