

## SEA GRANT

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Here's hoping that if you went out for a nice seafood dinner with your family recently that you had better luck than I did. Of my dozen oysters, five had that questionable, dried out look and all were served at room temperature and hadn't been shucked out of the bottom shell. My pasta primavera with shrimp was served drowned under a sauce heavy enough to hide the fact that the shrimp were soft and flavorless. What struck me was that, besides the low quality of the seafood, the waitress (at a restaurant claiming to specialize in seafood) had no idea where the oysters were harvested from (aside from assuring us that they were from a reputable supplier) and told us that the shrimp were harvested from the Gulf of Mexico (when we asked) when it was clear that what we were served were low quality (= cheap) and very possibly imports.

Here's what I didn't know before that dinner that I know now; it turns out that as of January 2010 in Alabama, restaurant customers are entitled to request the country of origin of the seafood being served (and restaurants need to let consumers know that they can do this by posting either a sign or a notice on the menu). Mississippi is considering adopting legislation similar to Alabama's. Both are an expansion of the federal country of origin labeling (COOL) requirements for raw fish and shellfish sold in large supermarkets that went into effect several years ago but does not extend to restaurants. The intent of these programs is to allow consumers to make informed decisions about the food that they buy and consume.

Remember though that I'd asked where the seafood was from but there were decent odds that I was eating shrimp that had never seen the Gulf of Mexico, much less spent any of their lifecycle in it! If I'm right, I paid for something that I didn't want and, from an industry perspective, other people who might not know better could walk away with a very poor

impression of 'Gulf' shrimp. So what's a suspicious consumer to do? In Alabama, the restaurant country of origin labeling regulations are enforced by the Alabama Department of Public Health and local boards of health. These are the health inspectors that will ensure that those notices are properly displayed. They are also the folks that have the more challenging problem of dealing with questions of whether restaurants are accurately representing the country of origin of the seafood that they are selling. Currently, there does not appear to be a defined procedure for when this question arises. At this point, if you have doubts, you should contact your local county health department with your questions and concerns.

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