





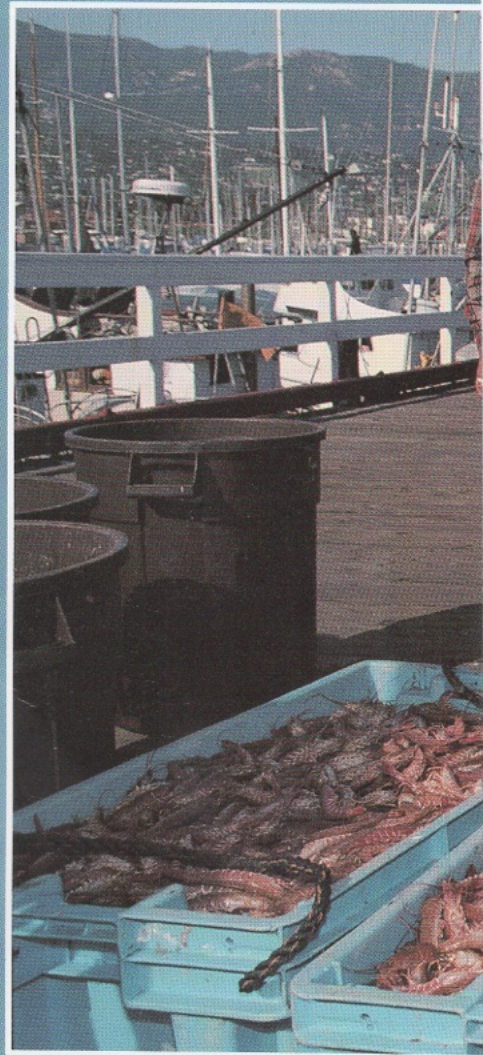
RIDGEBACKS Santa Barbara's 'Folk Shrimp'

*The Best in the West
But the Dickens to Peel*

by D.B. Pleschner

It was a neat idea that his 12-year-old daughter dreamed up, "Junior" Gorgita remembers thinking. The Queen of England was planning an official visit to Santa Barbara, and at that time, early in 1983, Gorgita was fishing for ridgeback shrimp: Why not give some shrimp to the Queen?

D.B. Pleschner photos





A day in the life of "Junior" Gorgita: Scenes from a ridgeback boat off the Santa Barbara Channel. Gorgita and crew ready their catch for the shrimp peddlers.

He never dreamed that the White House would actually approve the plan, much less that the worst El Nino in history would unleash its fury on Santa Barbara the very day the Queen arrived. The royal yacht could not navigate the harbor, yet Gorgita went fishing. At the royal presentation held that afternoon at the Santa Barbara airport, Prince Phillip asked him, "Wasn't the sea terribly rough?"

"It was rough, all right," Gorgita boomed, "but the Queen needed her shrimp."

Ridgebacks have garnered a fair measure of national TV publicity for a small local fishery, thanks to Manuel Anthony Gorgita Jr. A burley man with flame red hair, he has been a commercial fisherman for most of his 30-plus years, coming from a Portuguese fishing family with one of the most venerable names in Santa Barbara fishing

history. Not long after his adventure with the Queen, on another rough day, Junior took Julia Child shrimping aboard his 50-foot *Chrisde*, the day later commemorated on TV in a *Dinner with Julia* segment.

"You going to hire me on? Minimum wage?" Julia quips on board. And examining a bright pink, freshly washed catch she exudes, "It's a marvelous little shrimp. It's delicious." Indeed, ridgebacks have been called the best tasting shrimp on the West Coast.

Otherwise known as RBs, ridgies, or simply Santa Barbara shrimp, ridgebacks are one of only a few species of free-spawning benthic crustaceans on the West

Coast, and the only one in Southern California. Ranging from Monterey to Baja California, ridgebacks are most abundant in the Santa Barbara Channel, at home on mud bottoms from 5 to 130 fathoms (the bulk of the commercial catch is taken from 60 to 100 fathoms). Ridgebacks, so called for their hard, sharp-ridged shells, have been fished on a small scale for local markets for decades. But beginning in 1978-79, the fishery came of age. It has since gone on a rollercoaster ride, landings rising and falling, with shrimp abundance inversely proportional to size and price: the bigger the volume, the smaller and lower priced the shrimp.

A combination of factors

spurred interest in ridgebacks, Gorgita recalls. Spot prawns, the traditional trawl shrimp fishery in Santa Barbara, began declining in the late 1970s. Concurrently, a few innovative processors began touting RBs. Most likely, the main reason was availability. Ridgebacks were so abundant that a boat could make one tow just a few miles outside the harbor and return in a couple of hours with more than 1,000 pounds. At 50 cents a pound in those days, it was easy work. But the glory days didn't last long.

Accustomed to beginning at 2 a.m., Junior Gorgita cheerfully barks, "Banker's hours!" when he climbs aboard the *Chrisde* this morning at 5 a.m. Santa Barbara harbor is still asleep, swaddled in fog, as Gorgita slips out. He reaches the grounds in an hour, and with the help of his one-man crew, quickly deploys the shrimp net, greeting the dawn that tinges the Santa Ynez mountains with the clang of 1,000-pound steel doors and the whine of cabled main wire. Typical gear is a single-rig shrimp trawl, a typical tow lasts three to four hours, and a typical day runs long.

For the next four hours he drags the channel, lolling along at a speed of 1.5 knots. "When I started this, around 1980, there used to be four boats out here and one in Ventura," Gorgita begins a typical fisherman's lament, talking over the engine's drone. "Now there must be 20." When shrimping is good, the ridgeback grounds outside Santa Barbara begin to look like the Golden State freeway—in slow motion.

Ridgeback habits differ from the nine Atlantic species of *Sicyonia*, the most abundant of which is the rock shrimp (*S. brevirostris*). RBs are prolific, albeit seasonal spawners unlike rock shrimp, which spawn yearlong, inhabit sand bottom instead of mud, and grow

Facts on Ridgebacks

Season: October - May

Avg. annual landings: 767,000 pounds
(past three years)

Product form/price: \$1.25/lb. ex-vessel
\$2.95/lb. shell-on tails
\$5.25/lb. P&D
All prices FOB Santa Barbara

Avg. size: 40 - 60 count, shell on

twice as fast and live half as long—about 22 months compared to the ridgeback's life span of four to five years. Mating, ridgeback-style, coincides with peak molt activity, during winter and spring. Females store up sperm, then fertilize their eggs at spawning, and from May to about October consummate multiple spawnings, averaging three in summer, casting eggs into the currents to float inshore and settle. After one year, young prawns move offshore and into the fishery. In years of peak abundance, the incoming year class has contributed up to 60 percent of the catch, notes John Sunada, associate marine biologist for the California Department of Fish and Game, chronicler of RB fishery trends.

Landings of 355,600 pounds in 1979 fell steadily year after year, bottoming at 141,000 pounds in 1982, the year that the Fish and Game Commission adopted a summer closed season, June 1 through Sept. 20, to protect females and their offspring. By 1984, the catch rebounded to about 600,000 pounds, peaking at nearly 1 million pounds in 1985 and dropping to about 700,000 pounds in 1986—200,000 pounds of which came from Santa Monica

Bay which harbored a small concentration of RBs which prospecting shrimpers happened onto. Shrimpers who had averaged better than 200 pounds per hour during peak fishing years found themselves lucky to score 500 pounds in four hours—sometimes all day—by the end of the 1986-87 season.

At 10 a.m., Gorgita announces, "Time to go to work," ambling outside to man the winches. As the net whines up, the gulls and pelicans start arriving. By the time the cod-end surfaces, the scene from the back deck seems like a rerun of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*. Hundreds of birds blanket the ocean around the boat; their cacophony is deafening. Gorgita swings the cod-end on deck, opens it and spills out a mountain of gray mud. On closer inspection, the mound becomes a writhing pile of life, including more than 1,000 pounds of ridgebacks—a good tow even in good times. The birds scream in anticipation.

"Right conditions, right spot," Gorgita shakes his head, slightly amazed at his good fortune. "The weather plays a big role," he says. "The first day after a storm is usually best for fishing. Today

there's no wind, no current—that makes towing easier. These might be the shrimp that were up above last month," he speculates further, deducing that ridgebacks move, somehow. Then he utters a hoarse chuckle. "My dad always said, 'When you think you've got it figured out, it's time for the nut-house.' Come back in two weeks and it won't be like this." For ridgeback fishermen, as for the fishery, success rides on a critter with distinctly cyclical comings and goings, patterns that neither biologists nor fishermen fully understand.

Even with all its culinary 'eclat, the ridgeback's marketing story mimics the same dizzying ride as the fishery. The market grew, in the beginning, because processors were successful pushing ridgebacks out of town. But early attempts to distribute whole frozen RBs failed in a big way because of melanosis, or "black spot," aggravated by the mud in the animal's gillplates. That problem diagnosed, the market switched to frozen shell-on tails and took off—until the resource crash of 1981-82. Before the fishery began nose-diving, boat prices had risen to about 80 cents a pound. With demand up and supply down, they reached \$1.25.

When the fishery recovered in 1984, there again was a tremendous supply of shrimp—but they were too small: 50-60 count per pound (shell-on tails). Used to 30-40 count, the tail market didn't want a lot of little shrimp, and the big distributors disappeared. When ex-vessel prices dipped to 50 cents a pound, however, Junior Gorgita took marketing matters into his own hands.

One Saturday morning, about three years ago, he went to work, made one tow and proceeded to sell his catch on the dock, helped by his wife, De. Peddlers entered the picture soon afterward, and they have since come to dominate the ridgeback market, moving by some estimates as much as 80



percent of the catch. RBs are hawked at swap meets, farmers' markets and door-to-door for \$2-\$3 a pound for fresh whole shrimp. They've also become a big hit at local seafood bars: Instead of beer and pretzels, now it's peel-and-eat shrimp. Hooked on the low price, customers return for ridgebacks' sweet, lobster-like taste. And an erstwhile Southern California phenomenon is attracting a legion of new fans statewide and beyond—not to mention Julia Child and the Queen of England.

Another twist in the ridgeback's marketing saga occurred in 1985 when the shrimp came in larger, returning to 40 count, and California processors figured out that the same machine that peels a rock shrimp peels a ridgeback, too. Having meats to sell opened up new markets for the hard-to-peel shrimp, especially white tablecloth restaurants which didn't have the patience or the people to peel the succulent shrimp by hand. Ridgeback meats have a five-day shelf life fresh, and up to six months in a good freezer.

As the catch drops and the shrimp get larger (1986 saw 31-

count ridgebacks), the price, too, is going up. Ex-vessel closed for the summer of 1987 at \$1.25, with wholesale at \$2.95 a pound for shell-on tails, \$5.25 for P&D ridgebacks, FOB Santa Barbara.

What's in store for the future? Each summer, CDF&G's John Sunada embarks on a research cruise, operating a trawl to see what's what. For the past two years, his survey has turned up a declining abundance of shrimp, with no evidence of strong recruitment. "What's out there is large shrimp, 3- to 4-year-old shrimp that are nearing the end of their natural cycle," he says.

This year's survey also documented an increase in predators, specifically hake and Dover sole. What bearing this might have Sunada is not sure: "It's hard to tell about this fishery. Each year there's something a little different." For example, now spot prawns appear to be making a comeback; Sunada believes the closed season implemented in 1984 may be helping. But for ridgebacks, in the absence of a strong new year class, and recruits comprising less than 20 percent of

the survey sample in 1987, it looks like another mediocre year in 1988.

But Junior Gorgita is getting used to ridgebacks' ups and downs. "I don't know which part of the cycle I like better," he says.

"Big shrimp, there are fewer of them but the price is better. Little shrimp are harder to sell and the price is lower, but you get tonnage." His face lights up, remembering how it was, thinking of how it could be. In the meantime,

diehard ridgeback fishermen will scratch along, fill in time (and bankrolls) with other fisheries, waiting for the bumper crop that's bound to come along and start the ridgeback roller coaster climbing again. □

Ridgeback Cuisine a la Chef Dennis Bybee

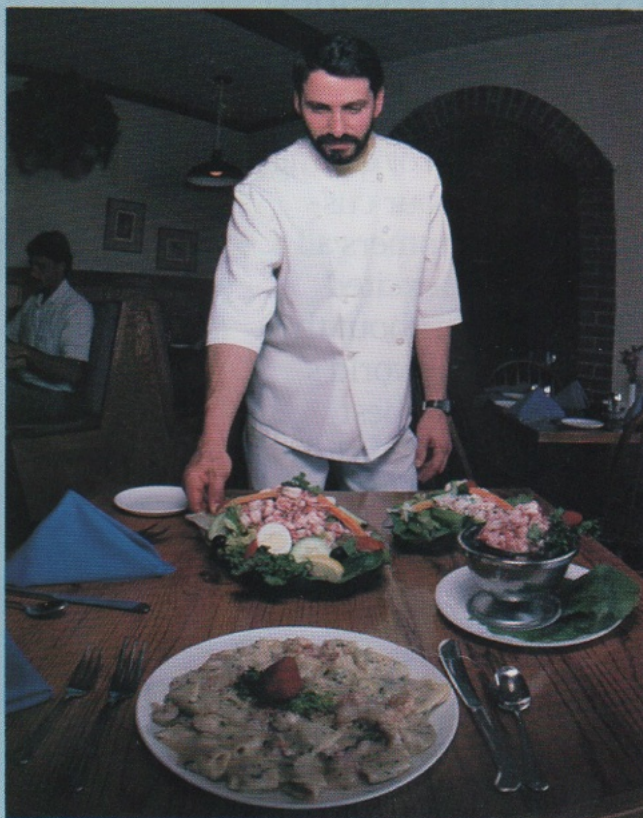
Chef Dennis Bybee's story is a classic tale of "local boy makes good." Fresh out of high school, Bybee began washing dishes at Monterey's famed Sardine Factory. He remained for 14 years, working his way up through the ranks, tutoring under three European chefs, filling spare time with college courses on restaurant management. His reputation spread, thus it was with no small measure of culinary anticipation that connoisseurs greeted his arrival as head chef of Andrias, a popular restaurant in Santa Barbara, in 1982.

Before coming to Santa Barbara, however, Bybee knew nothing about ridgeback shrimp. He learned quickly. Andrias is now the "in" place to dine on a cornucopia of dishes created under the inspired hand of Chef Bybee. RB fans can still "peel-em-n-eat-em" at Andrias's oyster bar. There's also a ridgeback omelette for brunch and an array of ridgeback salads—avocado stuffed with ridgebacks, pasta salad with ridgebacks, ridgeback louis ...But it's Bybee's dinner menu that garners rave reviews.

Ridgeback bisque a la Bybee is superb. His secret? He simmers RB shells in his stock for a memorable, robust flavor. Ridgeback scampi also offers a unique flavor sensation—firm, sweet shrimp with a taste reminiscent of lobster. Bybee's special entree is another crowd pleaser: Tortellini a la Ridgeback, or as the menu describes, "Pasta stuffed with ricotta, parmesan and romano cheeses, cooked Alfredo style with local ridgeback shrimp." With the success of these dishes, Andrias has become the largest single market for P&D ridgebacks in the country. (When Bybee started at Andrias, before the advent of the peeling machine, mountains of ridgebacks had to be shelled by hand.)

TORTELLINI OF RIDGEBACK SHRIMP

18 pieces of cooked tortellini
2 1/2 ounces raw cleaned ridgeback shrimp
1 ounce chopped scallions
1 tablespoon chopped parsley



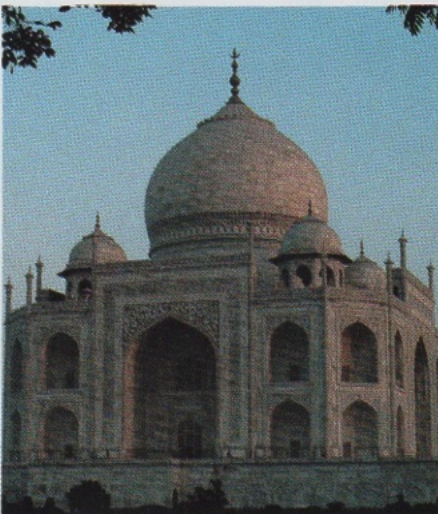
At Andrias Harborside in Santa Barbara, Chef Bybee presents an array of dishes featuring ridgeback shrimp.

1 teaspoon fresh chopped garlic
1/2 cup whipping cream
1/4 cup fresh grated parmesan cheese
1/4 cup clam juice
Pinch of ground white pepper
1 tablespoon fresh chopped basil
1 egg yolk
1 teaspoon olive oil
1 ounce white wine

Place olive oil in saute pan and let it get hot. Lightly flour shrimp and saute briefly. Add garlic, stir, and add wine; shake pan to burn off brief flame, then add cream and remaining ingredients. Cook, stirring constantly, until the mixture thickens, about 3 to 4 minutes. Serve hot, garnished with parsley. Serves two.



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Cover photo by Aaron Jones