

Shrimp for Christmas

Written by Laura Von Harten

A solid lump of frozen shrimp. When I was growing up, that's what I gave my teachers for Christmas every year.



It is also what my sister, Tracy, gave to her teachers. And what my brothers, Bo and Raymond, gave to theirs. Bottom line: If you taught one of the Von Harten kids, you could count on getting a lump of shrimp for Christmas.

Better than a lump of coal, right?

And it wasn't just regular shrimp. It was magnificent Sea Island shrimp that arrived on the boats at our father's dock. Some were still alive, bodies twitching, fierce eyes fixed in an angry glare. That is, if you care to believe that crustaceans can feel anger.

These shrimp may not have had feelings, thoughts or eternal souls, but they had glossy shells, a vibrant grey-brown slick with seawater, and they were headed and iced down immediately before making their way up to our fishmarket.

They had two choices at that point: get sold, or get frozen. That is, if you care to believe that crustaceans have choices.

Most of the ones that got put in the line for the freezer went with their shell on. But a few were held back and cleaned up a little more. Because despite the beauty of their shells, after they are frozen, shell-on shrimp's not much of a gift. After the hassle of thawing it, you have to peel it, and for most people that's no fun.

So the shrimp intended for gift-giving were tenderly and carefully peeled and de-veined, washed clean and then placed into little freezer bags made of a thick, durable plastic that met my father's quality standards. Then they went into the deep freeze.

Shrimp for Christmas

Written by Laura Von Harten

They came out of the freezer in irregular ball-like shapes. And when it came time to give away these solid-frozen packets of pure protein, we needed to do a little dressing-up. Otherwise it looked quite unappealing. You can't just hand someone a ball of creepy grey frozen matter and say "Merry Christmas."

So we wrapped our shrimp-balls in elegant, silvery aluminum foil. It was elegant in our minds, at least. And it seemed so luxurious at the time – all that beautiful, expensive aluminum foil, just to wrap something that didn't really need wrapping. What extravagance!

And it was really the most suitable material to use, because regular Christmas wrapping paper got soggy from condensation. My siblings and I learned this from personal experience, because there always came a point – maybe around fourth grade? – when we would rebel against the foil.

At that age we were beginning to have doubts about the reliability of parental wisdom. We were sick and tired of blind obedience, and we questioned this yearly ritual of wrapping shrimp in aluminum foil.

Also, we were getting old enough to recognize that, when used as gift wrap, aluminum foil looked hokey. All the other kids at school brought gifts wrapped in beautiful colors and garnished with lovely, store-bought stick-on bows. We desperately wanted to fit in.

So as we matured, we each went through this phase where we insisted on using regular Christmas wrapping paper. And a stick-on bow.

We would be sorry. As we walked to school, our snotty little fourth-grade faces smug in the knowledge that we were bearing the most gorgeous frozen lump of shrimp ever given to a teacher by a Von Harten child, the worst-case scenario started to unfold.

By the time we got to school and presented the teacher with this most exquisite of gifts, it

Shrimp for Christmas

Written by Laura Von Harten

looked like something hacked off of a mummy. It was hideous, with strips of damp paper clinging to the sweaty, cold grey ball, the precious store-bought stick-on bow crushed at the bottom of the bag.

The shame and humiliation was almost unbearable. It was a painful life lesson, but from then on we understood the true power of condensation and the inevitable treachery of paper.

So we all eventually ended up settling for the aluminum foil, despite the fact that, to our increasingly discerning and consumeristic eyes, that foil was starting to look more homely with each passing year.

When wrapped, what did a frozen lump of shrimp look like? Imagine a big Hershey's Kiss, one with significant pre-existing cosmetic deformities, that has endured a harsh blow that caused its cute little tip to get flattened out. Nothing a bow couldn't fix.

But bows were a sore point. Those stick-on bows would not adhere to aluminum foil, so we had to use that thin, flat Christmas ribbon, the kind that comes in red, green and gold. We favored the red and green because the gold did not look right up against that silvery aluminum foil.

That ribbon was the bane of our Christmas shrimp-wrapping sessions. Tying a ribbon on a spherical object is difficult enough. Have you ever tried to tie a bow on a ball? And get it to stay? It's a challenge, and that is assuming that you have the fine-motor skills of an adult, and that the item you are wrapping is, most likely, at room temperature.

Now imagine clumsy children trying to coax that cheap, flimsy ribbon onto a sphere of aluminum-foiled wrapped frozen shrimp. It was a mind-bending and dangerous endeavor, akin to a lunar mission, or a climb to the summit of Mt. Everest.

You see, we had to take firm hold of that cold, misshapen lump, study the nuances of its terrain, scout for lumps and bumps, and explore for crevasses that would provide the best purchase for that puny little piece of ribbon. Then we had to execute our plan, which was often aborted because our calculations were off. At times it could get really bad. The reconnaissance of the

Shrimp for Christmas

Written by Laura Von Harten

frozen mass, the painstaking effort to chart a successful ribbon approach path, the repeated attempts to apply the ribbon and tie a knot it in (it usually required at least three tries) – all this exposed our tiny fingers to the threat of frostbite.

To make matters worse, the colder our fingers got, the more difficult it was to tie that knot. The more difficult it was to tie the knot, the more likely it was we would fail. Then we would have to repeat the attempt with fingers that much colder.

It was a vicious cycle, a classic story of man against the elements. Finishing the Christmas wrapping project required courage and endurance. But we never lost hope.

And, in the end, our teachers always got their shrimp.

[Read More My Lowcountry](#)