



THE PLAIN DEALER

Deveining shrimp is a matter of taste

Wednesday, July 13, 2005

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Can you eat the black stuff in the crevice of shrimp? Is it shrimp waste? Is it OK to eat if it's cooked? Should we expect restaurants to serve cleaned shrimp?

Shrimp waste? Ewww! What we're talking about here is the sand vein, which is, indeed, part of the digestive tract of shrimp.

Shrimp, though, are probably too primitive to produce dangerous waste. All shrimp species have a sand vein along the spine and a blood vein along the inside curve. The blood vein need not be removed. The prominence of the sand vein and the amount of sand in it vary by shrimp species and diet.

Removing the vein is a matter of aesthetics, not health. In the United States, it is usually removed, although in other cultures it is considered acceptable to leave it alone. If your restaurant is serving shrimp with the vein intact, and the result is gritty or unpalatable, I would let the chef know.

Gourmet Spot's Guide to deveining shrimp includes several links. Go to www.gourmetspot.com, click on "To Do," and then look for the section on deveining shrimp.

Are we at risk when microwaving food on a plastic plate? Some restaurants do this. What about takeout containers?

For years, rumors have circulated on the Internet regarding an increased risk of cancer associated with the use of plastics in the microwave. One has to do with the purported presence of dioxin in plastics. The other focuses on a chemical called diethylhexyl adipate, or DEHA, which is a plasticizer used to make plastics flexible. Studies show that it may leach into foods wrapped in plastics, especially fatty foods such as meat or cheese.

According to the Food and Drug Administration, the leaching caused by plastic film is well below toxic levels. And the FDA has found no evidence of dioxin in plastic food containers.

But Edward Machuga, a consumer safety officer in the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, suggests that consumers use containers according to directions and only for their intended purpose. If there are no instructions for microwaving, you should use another container that is microwave safe. Microwave-safe containers are made to withstand high temperatures.

The American Plastics Council says specifically that single-use containers such as margarine tubs and restaurant carryout containers should not be used in the microwave. Use only microwave-safe plastic wrap, and don't allow it to touch your food during microwave cooking.

That said, I don't want even small amounts of DEHA in my food if it can be avoided. I like to microwave in glass or ceramic and use wax or parchment paper to cover food while cooking. Remove the foam trays from frozen meats before thawing in the microwave, and avoid those insulated restaurant containers that often melt.

If your restaurant is reheating food on a nonmicrowave-safe plastic plate, ask that paper or china be used.

To read the FDA's take on the plastics in the microwave issue, go to www.fda.gov/fdac/features/2002/602_plastic.html

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