

Southern Living

North Carolinians Have Been Lining Up For These Old-School Shrimp Burgers Since The '50s



Credit: Abby Price

A shrimp burger might sound unusual if you've never had one, but it's a way of life along [North Carolina's Crystal Coast](#). The sandwich features crispy [fried shrimp](#) piled high on a hamburger bun, topped with a little ketchup and [creamy coleslaw](#).

If you aren't from North Carolina, you might not have had the pleasure of enjoying one, but once you do, you'll be hooked. And there's no better place to try one than at [El's Drive-In](#) in Morehead City, where this humble coastal classic became a legend.

My family has been visiting [Morehead City](#) for years, and I fell in love with the area so much that my husband and I eventually moved there for a stint—it's actually where our daughter was born.

Whenever family or friends came to visit, our first stop was always El's. It's the kind of local spot that everyone needs to experience at least once, but once you do, you'll be hooked and probably find yourself going back again before your trip is over.



Credit: Abby Price

Old-School Charm You Can't Find Anywhere Else

Opened in 1959, El's Drive-In has been a beloved staple of the community for more than six decades. As the name suggests, it's a true old-school drive-in—there's no indoor seating, no flashing menu boards, and no intercom to shout your order into.

Instead, you pull into a spot, and a carhop comes right to your car window to take your order. You can savor your meal from the comfort of your car or at one of the few picnic tables outside. It's nostalgic, unfussy, and welcoming in that classic small-town way.

In 2024, El's closed for nine months for a major renovation—a change that initially worried longtime regulars. But instead of tearing down the old building, the team did something remarkable: they carefully dismantled it brick by brick so they could reuse the original bricks in the remodel. The updates mainly were to expand the kitchen and keep up with growing demand, but preserving the restaurant's character was a top priority.



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A Family Tradition That Spans Generations

That dedication to tradition runs deep at El's. The drive-in has been family run since the very beginning. Founder El Frank opened the doors in 1959, later passing the business to his son, Mark, and now Mark's son, Shelton, oversees most of the daily operations. Three generations later, the Franks continue to serve the same comfort food that's made El's a local landmark.

That [multigenerational](#) spirit extends far beyond the Frank family. My husband's family grew up vacationing in Morehead City, and El's has been part of their story for decades. His grandparents, parents, himself, and now our own little one have all eaten shrimp burgers in that same parking lot.

It's the kind of place that feels woven into [family tradition](#)—where everyone has a memory tied to a meal. My husband's grandparents used to talk about eating here when they were young, and now our toddler sits in the backseat, giggling over French fries. It's a place that takes you back, reminding you of how something as simple as a shrimp burger can bring generations together.

What To Eat

While the shrimp burger is undoubtedly the star, the menu is full of other coastal classics ranging from oyster burgers and cheeseburgers to hushpuppies and hand-spun milkshakes. Everything is cooked fresh, served fast, and tastes even better with the salty breeze coming off Bogue Sound.



Credit: Abby Price

A Few Local Tips For The Best Experience

While you really can't go wrong at El's any time of day or year, I've picked up a few local tips over the years that can make your visit even better. First, summertime is by far the busiest season, and because everything is cooked fresh to order, waits can sometimes be long. One of the best tricks is to call ahead, and they'll start prepping your food before you arrive, which cuts down the wait considerably.

Lunch is especially busy, but that's part of the fun, and I love the lively energy of the midday crowd. Just keep in mind that if you're on a tight schedule or have little ones in tow, plan for extra time.

For a quieter experience, try visiting outside of lunch hours, or come during the shoulder season or winter, when there are fewer out-of-towners and the drive-in is just as delicious without the hustle and bustle.



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A Community Staple That Gives Back

What makes EI's even more special is its deep community connection. The family has long been involved with the [Carteret County Chamber of Commerce](#) and supports local organizations like animal shelters, the Boys & Girls Club, and [Fellowship of Christian Athletes](#). Giving back has always been part of who they are.