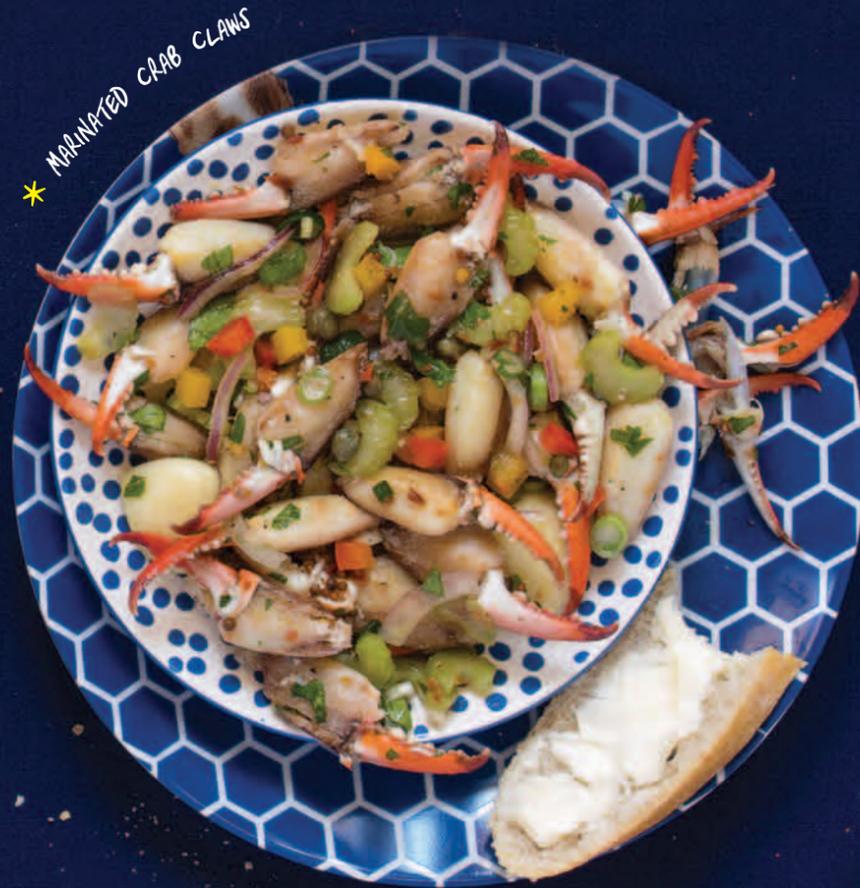


CLAWS TO CELEBRATE

6 recipes for our native Blue Crab, plus a side order of local crustacean history

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY EUGENIA UHL



* MARINATED CRAB CLAWS



It is difficult to imagine an environment more perfect for the blue crab than Louisiana's jagged coast, which nestles an abundance of marshes and estuaries within some 7,721 miles of shoreline. Blue crabs are found along the East Coast and across the Gulf states from Florida to Texas. Louisiana landings account for 83 percent of the Gulf total and 25 percent of the U.S. total. The blue crab's economic impact on Louisiana comes to \$293 million a year, more than twice that of the crawfish industry. 🍷



Boiled Crabs

The 1901 edition of The Picayune's Creole Cook Book included instructions for eating boiled crabs with a knife and fork, "without once using the fingers." That must have been quite a feat, and it certainly bears no resemblance to the modern crab boil, where everyone rolls up their sleeves and has at it. Judging from the old recipe, there was much less hot pepper involved in the boil than is customary today.

There are dozens of brands of crab boil on the market, and they vary greatly in the amount of red pepper they contain, so it's advisable to **start with the amount recommended on the package and add additional to taste**. You'll need a large pot with a removable basket and a heat source, usually a propane burner. Into this pot will go **water, salt, crab boil, halved lemons, garlic, and any other spices, such as cayenne pepper, you wish**. Bring the pot to a boil and let it boil for about 10 minutes. Taste the water and add additional crab boil and other seasonings, as desired. If you're cooking **smoked sausage, corn, and/or small red potatoes**, add them to the pot. When the water comes back to a boil, add the live crabs and cook for 10 minutes. Turn off the heat, dump in a bag of ice to stop the cooking, and let the crabs soak in the water for 10 minutes to absorb the seasonings. Lift out the crabs on a newspaper-covered table, and dig in, no forks needed, though knives are useful for cracking the claws.

The scientific name for the blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) means “tasty (or savory) beautiful swimmer,” and that is a most fitting description considering how delectable it is and how many ways it can be prepared and served. From spicy boiled crabs spread out on newspaper-covered tables and accompanied by cold battles of beer to delicate lumps of snow-white crabmeat served in elegant restaurants along with expensive bottles of Champagne or chardonnay, the blue crab’s appeal is near universal.

That popularity comes at a price, which is reflected in the soaring cost of crabs and crabmeat. Fresh jumbo lump crabmeat, which not that many years ago was around \$12 or so a pound, often goes for more than \$30 a pound, when you can find it. There are a number of factors that figure into the price rise, but the demand from out-of-state is a big part of it. The truth is that a lot of crabs and crabmeat are shipped to the Chesapeake Bay area, where crabbing has declined precipitously. Some years ago we ate huge, meaty steamed crabs, the kind we rarely see here, in a small Baltimore restaurant. I complimented the owner on the crabs and asked where they came from. “Lake Pontchartrain,” he replied. I should have known. 🐞

Marinated Crab Claws

Serve these with good crusty bread to dip in the marinade.

- 1 cup dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons crab boil (whole spices)
- 1 tablespoon crushed red pepper
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 bay leaf
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled
- ½ cup chopped celery with leaves
- ½ cup chopped red onion
- ½ cup chopped red bell pepper
- ½ cup chopped yellow bell pepper
- ¼ cup chopped parsley
- ¼ cup chopped green onion tops
- 1 tablespoon capers, drained and rinsed
- ½ cup white wine vinegar
- ¼ cup fresh squeezed lemon juice
- 1 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Hot sauce to taste (optional)
- Cayenne pepper to taste (optional)
- 1 pound cooked crab claws, cracked

In a non-reactive pan, combine white wine, crab boil, crushed red pepper, black pepper, bay leaf, and garlic. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer for 10 minutes. Cool. Combine cooled wine mixture with remainder of ingredients (except crab claws). Stir and adjust seasonings as desired. Place cracked crab claws in a flat non-reactive container (an 8½ x 13-inch pyrex dish is ideal) and pour marinade over. Cover, seal tightly with plastic wrap, refrigerate, and marinate for 6 hours or longer, stirring occasionally. **Makes 4 servings as an appetizer.**

* TIPS FOR CRAB CLAWS:

If you’ve saved the claws from your crab boil, you’re good to go, but rescuing them from hungry eaters is often difficult, to say the least. If you need claws for this dish, you can buy them, already cooked, from a fish market or supermarket. In either case, you’ll need to crack the claws with a nutcracker or the back of a large knife.



Baked Tomatoes filled with Crabmeat

Preheat oven to 350 degrees and butter a baking dish.

Cut off tops of **4 large tomatoes**; scoop out pulp and seeds with a spoon. Salt interior of tomatoes and invert on a rack to drain.

Melt **4 tablespoons butter plus** in a frying pan, add **¼ cup diced onion**, **¼ cup diced bell pepper**, and **¼ cup diced celery**, and cook until softened, about 5 minutes.

Transfer vegetables to a mixing bowl and stir in **½ cup breadcrumbs**. When mixture is cool, stir in **½ cup heavy cream**, **4 teaspoons chopped parsley**, and **4 teaspoons chopped green onion tops**. Add **1 pound lump crabmeat (picked over)** and toss gently. Season with **coarse salt**, **freshly ground black pepper** and **Cayenne pepper to taste**. Add **1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice**.

Fill tomatoes with crabmeat mixture, mounding the tops. Sprinkle with breadcrumbs, dot with butter, and bake until tops are browned, about 30 minutes.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS.



This crabmeat stuffing can also be baked in other vegetables, in a crab shell, in individual ramekins or used as a stuffing for fish, such as flounder.



* CRAB AND OKRA GUMBO

We tend to think of gumbo as more of a winter food, but it's also a great transitional springtime menu item., especially when it contains seafood.



* TIPS FOR CRAB CAKES

This recipe can be partially prepared in advance. After the crab mixture is formed into cakes, the cakes can be covered and refrigerated until later in the day when it is time to cook them. A number of variations in the recipe are possible, such as substituting unsalted cracker crumbs for bread crumbs, using clarified butter or a mixture of butter and oil for frying.



* CRAB CAKES WITH LEMON MAYONNAISE

I have always favored jumbo lump crabmeat, but given the cost, I find myself using more backfin and claw crabmeat. They're not as pretty as lump, but they can be combined with lump crabmeat in crab cakes, gumbos, and the like. Claw crabmeat is particularly flavorful and can actually improve the taste of some dishes.

There is nothing quite as elegant and indulgent as chilled lump crabmeat served with extra-virgin olive oil, lemon, coarse salt, and freshly-ground black pepper. On second thought, sautéed soft-shell crabs are also a contender, but that is a subject for another article. Meanwhile, enjoy these toothsome recipes for hardshell blue crabs. 🍷

Crab & Okra Gumbo

Cooking okra in oil before adding liquid eliminates the "sliminess" that some people find unpleasant.

- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 2 stalks celery, chopped
- 1 pound okra, sliced
- 1 (28 oz.) can whole tomatoes
- 6 cups chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons dry roux
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme leaves
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- Cayenne to taste
- Hot sauce to taste
- 1 pound claw crabmeat, picked over
- 1 pound lump crabmeat, picked over
- ¼ cup chopped parsley

In a large dutch oven or heavy casserole, cook onions, celery, and okra in oil on medium heat, stirring frequently, until softened, about 10-15 minutes. Add tomatoes, stock, dry roux, and bay leaves; break-up tomatoes with your fingers or a spoon. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and simmer, stirring occasionally, until okra is tender, about 30 minutes. Season with thyme, salt, peppers, and hot sauce. Add crabmeat and cook until crabmeat is just heated through. Add chopped parsley. Serve with steamed rice. **Makes about 6-8 servings.**

Crab Cakes with Lemon Mayonnaise

Too often, crab cakes suffer from an overabundance of breadcrumbs. There should be just enough binding to hold a crab cake together. The slight pressure of a diner's fork should cause it to crumble. If you wish, you can use a mixture of lump and claw crabmeat in this recipe.

- 1 pound lump crabmeat, picked over
- 1 teaspoon cajun/creole seasoning
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley
- 1 tablespoon chopped green onion tops
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- ½ cup breadcrumbs

FOR FRYING

- ¼ cup olive oil
- ¼ cup flour
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- ½ cup breadcrumbs

LEMON MAYONNAISE

- 2 egg yolks
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon fresh squeezed lemon juice
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon finely-grated lemon zest
- Cayenne pepper to taste

Place crabmeat in a mixing bowl. Add cajun/creole seasoning, lemon juice, parsley, green onion tops, egg, and breadcrumbs. Mix gently with a fork, being careful not to break-up crabmeat. Form mixture into 4 cakes.

In a large skillet, heat olive oil on medium heat. When oil is hot, dredge crawfish cakes in flour, then egg, then breadcrumbs. Fry until nicely browned, about 4 minutes; turn and cook on the other side until browned, about 2 minutes. Drain on absorbent paper. Serve with Lemon Mayonnaise. **Makes 4 servings.**

LEMON MAYONNAISE In a mixing bowl, beat egg yolks, salt, and lemon juice with a wire whisk until pale yellow and creamy. Continue beating with whisk, while slowly adding olive oil, a drop at a time in the beginning. As the mixture emulsifies, increase slightly the amount of oil you're adding, while continuing to whisk, until all the oil has been added. Add lemon zest and cayenne, and whisk to incorporate. Adjust seasoning. **Makes about ½ cup.**

This dish is easy to prepare and can serve as the centerpiece of a luncheon or as a first course in a dinner menu.



Artichoke Hearts, Green Peas & Lump Crabmeat

This dish features a blend of savory and sweet flavors, and, served with the addition of toasted bread, provides a good crunch.

Combine **1 (9 ounces.) package frozen artichoke hearts, 2 tablespoons olive oil, ¼ cup dry white wine, and 1 tablespoon lemon juice** in a large non-reactive skillet. Bring to a boil, cover, and cook for 2 minutes. Add **1 cup frozen green peas**, stir, cover, and cook until artichoke hearts are tender, about 3 minutes. Add **1 pound lump crabmeat (picked over)** and stir gently, being careful not to break-up crabmeat. Season with **coarse salt, freshly ground black pepper and cayenne pepper to taste**. Cook just until crabmeat is heated through. Sprinkle with **2 tablespoons chopped parsley** and serve on **toasted bread**.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS.

