



PHOTOGRAPHY
BY ARSHIA KHAN

MADDIE'S PLACE CHEF
BRIAN DELONEY KNOWS
THERE'S ONLY ONE WAY TO
CELEBRATE THE WEATHER
TURNING WARM—AND
THAT'S BY BOILING UP A
POT OF MOUTHWATERING
MUDBUGS, *CHER*

BY
MARIAM MAKATSARIA

WORTHY CRAWLS



FROM LEFT Even though a crawfish boil is typically a stand-around affair, a festive table is set on the rooftop patio of Argenta Place in North Little Rock. Nearby, chef Brian Deloney preps his haul for the big moment.

HE STRIDES DOWN

the open terrace on Argenta Place's rooftop, through the chattering guests, all the way to the railing, and lights a cigarette. He's engaged in a conversation with his father, a clean white dish towel clutched between his pinkie and palm. Brian Deloney—amicable, casual, the kind of guy you'd expect to see behind a grill next door—is the man of the evening, the chef of this meal his friends and family have come to enjoy. But in looking at them as they stand elbow to elbow, in hearing the sounds of bottle caps and corks popping open, in listening to Brian's country music blaring through the speakers, it's clear this is more than just a bunch of people congregating around a well-planned, well-cooked and well-prepared meal. This is an *event*, a simple one at that, an entire-evening affair of food, booze, conversation—and very little else.

It's spring in the South, and for Brian,

the chef at Little Rock's Maddie's Place and a one-time resident of New Orleans, that means one thing: crawfish. Although his bona fides include stints at fine restaurants in NOLA and Las Vegas, and working with the likes of Emeril Lagasse for all of 10 years, Brian's no stranger to throwing a gratifying "crawfish party" (as he calls it). And when he's not having a crawfish boil, he's at one—even though you'll never see one taking place at his restaurant. Because to Brian, it's not a "restaurant, sit-down-type thing." It's not something he can ladle in a fancy bowl. And just like gumbo in New Orleans, there are no hard-and-fast rules as to what makes a good pot of crawfish. Everybody's a little bit different somehow. And you never know why, he says. It's just the way they were taught—recipes passed down, tweaked or, perhaps, changed altogether.

Brian makes his way back to the aluminum stock pot, which sits on a four-legged patio

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BOIL UP SOME MUDBUGS THE BRIAN DELONEY WAY P. 54

"IT'S ALL ABOUT FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND, OBVIOUSLY, GREAT FOOD," BRIAN SAYS. "IT DOESN'T GET ANY BETTER THAN THAT."



BLACK-EYED
PEA HUMMUS
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BRIAN KEEPS APPETIZERS LIGHT AND MELLOW—LIKE THE CRAB CAPRESE SALAD (P. 54) BELOW—AT HIS "CRAWFISH PARTIES," SO HIS GUESTS' PALATES AREN'T OVERWHELMED WHEN IT COMES TIME TO DIG INTO THE SPICY MUDBUGS. FOR DESSERT, HE RELIES ON SIMPLE, COOLING TREATS, LIKE A TRIED-AND-TRUE BANANA PUDDING (P. 55).



JUMBO LUMP
CRAB CAPRESE
SALAD
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"Sometimes too much to drink is barely enough."
Mark Twain

BLACK-EYED-PEA HUMMUS

By swapping out chickpeas in favor of good ol' black-eyed peas, Brian puts a Southern spin on this picnic-friendly favorite.

Serves 12

- 4 cups black-eyed peas, cooked (or substitute 3-4 cans)
- 1/4 cup ground cumin
- 1/4 cup lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon Creole seasoning
- Salt to taste

Combine all ingredients in a food processor, and process until smooth. Serve with pita chips—Brian likes to fry his, then spice them with Creole seasoning.

JUMBO LUMP CRAB CAPRESE SALAD

Tossing a pound of jumbo lump crab into Brian's take on a Caprese amps up a simple, spring-y salad. "It's hearty, but not too bold," he says, "which is perfect before things get spicy with the crawfish."

Serves 12

- 1 pound jumbo lump crab meat
- 8 vine-ripened tomatoes, diced
- 1 red onion, diced
- 10 basil leaves, sliced into a chiffonade
- 6 ounces fresh mozzarella, diced
- 2 tablespoons balsamic syrup*
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

Toss all ingredients together until mixed well.
Serve with grilled toast points.

*To make balsamic syrup, simmer a cup of balsamic vinegar over low heat until reduced by half. Allow to cool.

CRAWFISH BOIL

The first rule of crawfish boils is that there are no rules, Brian would be quick to tell you. But there are some guidelines, like the ones the chef abided by for this celebration. "Everyone kind of makes it their own way, you know?" he says. "And that's the fun part."

Serves 12

FOR SPICE MIX:

- 4 cups Creole seasoning
- 3 cups kosher salt
- 2 cups black pepper
- 2 cups cayenne pepper
- 1 cup granulated garlic

'TIS THE SEASONING

No two families do a crawfish boil quite the same. Some purge the mudbugs, others don't. Some use pre-made seafood-boil seasoning products, others make their own. It goes without saying that there is no right or wrong way to go about doing it. But to prepare his seasoning mix, Brian pours granulated onion, granulated garlic, black pepper, salt, creole seasoning and cayenne pepper in a white plastic bucket with halved lemons and onions. And lastly, he trickles Crystal hot sauce into the vessel, splattering the sides and painting the lemons and onions a vibrant orange-red.



- 1 cup granulated onion
- 5 jumbo white onions, peeled and quartered
- 20 lemons, cut in half
- 1/2 gallon Crystal hot sauce

FOR BOIL:

- 50 red bliss potatoes (plan for 3-4 per person)
- 1 40-pound bag live crawfish
- 5 pounds andouille sausage, cut into chunks (plan for 2-3 sausage chunks per person)
- 15 ears of corn, shucked and cut in half (plan for 2 halves per person)
- 30 garlic cloves, peeled
- 5 pounds gulf shrimp

FOR SPICE MIX:

In a large container, combine the spices. Toss in the lemons and onions. Drizzle the hot sauce over the top, and mix to combine.

FOR BOIL:

Fill a 40-gallon boiler 3/4-full with water. Add spice mix and bring to a boil. Once boiling, add potatoes and cook for 10 minutes. Add corn, sausage, garlic and crawfish and cook for 15-20 minutes. Turn off heat and add shrimp. Let sit for 15-20 minutes to soak up seasoning. Drain and spread on a paper-lined table.

M.J.'S BANANA PUDDING

A good friend of the Deloney's—the eponymous M.J.—makes this on the regular for gatherings and get-togethers. "It's great for parties," says Brian, "because it makes a lot. And the leftovers are just as good!"

Serves 12

- 1 5.1-ounce box of instant pudding mix (vanilla or banana)
- 1 box vanilla wafers
- 2 cups cold milk
- 1 14-ounce can Eagle Brand sweetened condensed milk
- 1 16-ounce container Cool Whip
- 3-4 bananas, cut into rounds
- Caramel sauce, either store-bought or made ahead of time

Combine pudding mix and milk in a large bowl. In another, mix condensed milk and Cool Whip.

Fold together. In a 13-by-9-inch pan, begin layering wafers, then bananas, then pudding mix, ending with pudding mix on top. To finish, crumble vanilla wafers on top, and drizzle with caramel sauce. Chill 2-3 hours before serving.



THE
BEST BREW
FOR A BOIL?
"LOUISIANA-MADE
ABITA," SAYS
BRIAN.

TIP: There usually aren't many crawfish remaining at the end of a boil—it's surprising how many of those crustaceans you can put away—but if you do have leftovers, Brian says to shell them, keep the tail meat, and save it for a crawfish pie or a chowder (which would also put those potatoes and corn to use).



HOW TO EAT A CRAWFISH:

- 1 Make sure you're holding the crustacean correctly, with the head between your index finger and thumb, and the tail between your dominant index finger and thumb.
- 2 Twist the tail (to the left or right) until it comes off. Discard the head.
- 3 Peel the first, widest layer (closest to the meat) of the tail's shell, like you would a shrimp's.
- 4 Pinch the tail, and pull the meat. Again, like you would with a shrimp.
- 5 Not satisfied? Try sucking the juices out of the mudbug's head. And if your crawfish is on the larger side, its claws can be cracked open for some more glorious meat.



"AFTER ALL THIS COOKING, I WIND UP NOT EATING ANY OF IT," BRIAN SAYS.

EVENT DESIGN CREDITS

LOCATION: Argenta Place Rooftop by New Argenta Fund LLC
STYLIST: Rosemary Hallmark
FLORAL: Becky Clement, Inspired by Nature
DECOR: Sweet Home | Clement, Mid-Towne Antique Mall
TABLES: Hank's Event Rentals

"THE DELONEYS ARE NEW ORLEANS PEOPLE," SAYS BRIAN'S FATHER, PHIL. "WE USED TO GO DOWN THERE ALL THE TIME. WE HAVE FAMILY THERE. HE'S GOT IT IN HIS BLOOD, TOO."

stove 2 feet from a propane tank and 3 feet away from a purple mesh sack hefty with close to 40 pounds of beady-eyed crawfish crawling on top of one another, feisty claws jutting in and out in a way that's more than a little unsettling. Reaching for a metal paddle, he lifts the hot lid off the pot with his towel and stirs the broth. A bright-orange foam has already begun forming on the surface around the bobbing halves of lemons and onions. It's a delicious moment. The air, already laden with spice and citrus, becomes even heavier with the aroma. He replaces the lid, and the steam continues to seep around the dented edges.

"It's all about family and friends and, obviously, great food. It doesn't get any better than that," he says, punctuating every other sentence with a short, abrupt chuckle. *Simple, good food.* He throws the phrase around like most Southern chefs do when describing their dishes, which are, to say the least, not so simple at all. "It's about getting away, getting to see people, 'cause life can get hectic."

The sleeves of his pastel-blue shirt are rolled up, revealing four tattoos, two on each forearm. A cap emblazoned with the letters "PK" (from a PK Grills steak cook-off he's just participated in) and that he doesn't take off the whole evening, sits on his head, and the floppy ends of hair at the nape of his neck look either wet or gelled. Brian's daughter, Madeline, after whom his restaurant is named, scampers by, a blur of purple pants and bright-pink bow on top of a high ponytail. The guests occasionally hover near the pot, beckoned by the siren call of the intoxicating smell. After a sniff and a "this smells great," or a "that looks good," they retreat to the bar tables at the far end of the rooftop, dipping Brian's creole-style pita chips into the black-eyed-pea hummus he has whipped up as an appetizer, or going for beer number two—or six.

For 30 minutes, Brian allows the slurry of seasonings he's prepared himself to soak into garlic cloves, andouille sausages, corn, potatoes and shrimp (for those who don't like or don't want to like crawfish). Then it's time. Brian and a friend, Jon Honeywell, lift the strainer basket and haul it to the table, the broth drip-drip-dripping a path. It takes two people to spread the mountainous heap of the bright-orange crustaceans on a brown-paper-lined table. Someone yelps as a couple of stray shrimp and potatoes tumble to the floor. Another shouts, "Five-second rule!" And "Incoming!" And "Hot stuff, right there!" There's more vapor waft-

ing from the scene than you'd see around a small bonfire.

After 10 minutes of incessant photo-taking, the guests start digging in. *Twist, snap, peel, pinch and tug. Repeat.* "You gotta suck the juices from the head," says Brian's friend Vince Foster as he throws his head back and takes it like a shot.

"The Deloneys are New Orleans people," says Brian's father, Phil Deloney, who's done his part to be festive by wearing a lobster-patterned shirt—but lobsters look like crawfish, so tonight it's a crawfish-patterned shirt—he'd gotten at a crab boil in Louisiana some years ago. His wife, Brian's mother, is sporting an identical shirt. "We used to go down there all the time. We have family there." Pointing at Brian, Phil adds, "He's got it in his blood, too."

But it's not just the Deloneys who pay homage to their Cajun roots. Hang around by the table enough, and you'll hear Louisiana-native Kellie Whilhite talk about the last time she and her husband Michael hosted a boil and gobbled down 32 pounds of crawfish—just between the two of them—before the guests had even arrived. It's easy to see why. Being from Louisiana, Kellie and Michael were weaned on annual crawfish feasts. She eats them at lightning speed, the way some people crack, pull apart and nibble on sunflower seeds—without much thought, almost second nature. "It's

funny, but the one sack that we do between our family, it's like the ritual, the rejoice of the season, you know?" she says, her fingers glistening wet. "We want to make that time the best. We want to make the next boil the best that it can be. That's our trial, for the right seasoning, the right spice, the right combination of everything. It's a time for us to celebrate, just the two of us and to bring the Louisiana tradition up here. We just indulge. Completely indulge." And when the real feast begins, Kellie and Michael, completely full and satiated, kick back and watch their entourage have at it.

A few hours on, the sun has already slinked out of sight. The patio heaters have kicked in. The cafe lights are on, shining against the dark sky. At the dining table (one of two tables on the rooftop), the candles are glowing but the chairs are empty.

"See?" Brian chimes in, glancing over at the crawfish table, which has slowly become more of a discarded-crawfish-shells table. He has finally let go of his dish towel. It now sits on the outdoor kitchen's countertop, splattered with orange stains. "This is where a crawfish boil winds up. Every single time." **AL**

TO PURGE OR NOT TO PURGE?

A lot of crawfish enthusiasts will tell you that the cardinal rule of a boil is to purge the mudbugs, which, simply put, means to rinse the crawfish in salt and water before cooking them to cleanse them of mud and debris. But there are others, like Brian, who think it's an old wives tale and that the saltwater bath doesn't do much at all. "I read a lot of articles that said [purging] doesn't do anything," he says. "I just wash them real good without salt. Everybody's got their own opinion on it, though. I just think it's an extra, unnecessary step."

LEFT A craft-paper-lined table loaded with the good stuff beckons just beyond the diners. Eventually, it's just too much to resist.