

SWEET CRAB

One of nature's great food gifts I think is crab. I'll never forget my first taste of crab. I was a very small kid on my first visit to Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco and there were giant steaming kettles everywhere in which fresh Dungeness crab were quickly cooked and then served up. We sat at a big picnic table covered with newspaper and spent the next couple of hours picking out the meat, sucking on the shells and eating it simply with a squeeze of fresh lemon. Those kinds of shared times around the table are unforgettable.

According to the Oxford Companion to Food there are estimated to be at least 4500 different crab species in the world. They range in size from the tiny pea crab which, as the name suggests, is about the size of a pea all the way up to the giant Japanese Spider crab which can measure as much as 12 feet from claw tip to claw tip.

In the USA, the four best-known crabs are Blue Crab, a species found on the Atlantic coast down to the Gulf of Mexico; Stone Crabs from around Florida and the southeast; King crab made famous by the television series "Deadliest Catch" and Dungeness crab from the Pacific Northwest.

For Blue crab, the Chesapeake Bay is perhaps the most famous home for these delectable little creatures. It's a delicious sweet crab with a beautiful blue color before cooking. Most of the meat comes from the body. When Blue Crab molt or shed their shells, which they do annually from April thru September, they are known as "soft shells". They are loved because you can eat them shells and all. They're best when you buy them alive and quickly sauté or deep-fry them so that the soft shell becomes crispy. This condition lasts for only a short time (a few hours) but ingenious folks have figured out a way to control this by taking them out of the seawater where they will stay alive for several days and the shell won't harden.

Stone crabs are sought after for their claws alone. The two front claws are not only delicately sweet, and powerful enough to crack an oyster shell (stone crabs feed on oysters, mussels, and fish) they're also "renewable". That is, they'll grow new ones in a couple of years. There are lots of opportunities to try Stone crab if you haven't already by doing a quick on-line search.

Dungeness Crab is found on the Pacific coast from Southern California up to Alaska. It gets its name from the village of Dungeness on the strait of Juan de Fuca in Washington state. They are larger than Blues and yield succulent sweet meat from both the body and the legs and claws. When cooked simply in boiling seawater the shell turns a bright red.

Since I live in Northern California my favorite crab is of course, Dungeness. Beginning in November, which is the opening of crab season, I look forward to reliving those gustatory memories of that little kid on Fisherman's Wharf. If you are intimidated by

cooking or cleaning crab, there are lots of online tutorials. A good starting place is www.wikihow.com/cook-dungeness-crab .

One of the most fun crab events of the year is held in late January in Mendocino County about 3 hours north of San Francisco. It's called Mendocino Crab and Wine Days. It's a 10-day countywide event in which all kinds of activities including trips on crab boats, special tastings with crab at Mendocino wineries and restaurants and of course crab cook offs and competitions. It's a magical time to be on the Northern California coast. Pacific storms blow in that are both beautiful and powerful. It makes you appreciate the work and courage of crab fishermen. For more information on this year's Crab and Wine Days celebration in Mendocino in January. Go to <https://mendocino.com/mendocino-crab-wine-days-festival> .

Here are some of my favorite crab recipes. You can use whatever crab meat is available to you but of course it must be Dungeness!

DUNGENESS CRAB DEVEILED EGGS

Makes 8

4 hard-boiled eggs
1/4 cup mayonnaise
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce, preferably white
5 ounces Dungeness crabmeat, picked over for shells and cartilage
Salt and drops of hot sauce to taste
Drops of lemon juice
Smoked paprika

Cut the eggs in half lengthwise. Carefully remove the hard yolks from the eggs, making sure not to break the 8 halved whites that remain. Place the yolks in a mixing bowl.

Mash the yolks with a fork. Add the mayonnaise, mustard and Worcestershire sauce. Blend well until the mixture is smooth. Fold in the crabmeat, trying to keep the crab pieces as intact as possible. Season to your taste with salt, hot sauce and lemon juice. Gently spoon into whites. Garnish with paprika and serve. Can be made a couple of hours ahead and refrigerated.

For perfect hard-boiled eggs and to prevent overcooking and the development of a green ring around the yolk: Place eggs in a single layer in a deep sauce pan. Cover by at least an inch of water. Bring to a boil then reduce heat and simmer for 1 minute. Off heat, cover and let sit until eggs and water are at room temperature, about 12 minutes. To peel, gently crack all over and starting at big end first, peel under cold running water.

DUNGENESS CRAB IN WINE & VERMOUTH

Serves 2 as a main course or 4 as an appetizer

Fresh mussels, clams and shrimp can also be added to the mix and you are on your way to your own cioppino. Julia Child loved vermouth to make sauces and broths so get a good one. They aren't expensive. Serve with a big stack of napkins and lots of crusty French bread.

1 large (2 – 1/2 pounds or so) cooked, fresh Dungeness crab
1/4-pound unsalted butter
2/3 cup vermouth
1/2 cup dry white wine
1-1/2 cups chicken stock
3 tablespoons thinly sliced garlic
1 inch fresh ginger, peeled and thinly sliced into coins
1-1/2 tablespoons soy sauce
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
2 teaspoons sugar
2 teaspoons cornstarch dissolved in 1 tablespoon water
1/4 cup chopped fresh parsley or a combination of parsley and chives
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Clean, crack and separate crab into sections and set aside.

Place remaining ingredients, except parsley and pepper, together in a sauce pan and simmer covered for 5 minutes or so. Add crab, parsley and pepper and warm crab through.

Divide into large bowls with the broth and serve immediately.

DUNGENESS CRAB CAKES WITH TARRAGON AIOLI

Serves 6 as a first course

The whole idea is to minimize the bread crumbs and maximize the crab. Cakes should just hold together when gently squeezed.

1-pound fresh cooked Dungeness crab meat, picked over to remove any shell
1 egg, beaten
5 tablespoons mayonnaise
1 tablespoon minced parsley
1 tablespoon minced green onion
2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce, white preferred

Salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste
Drops of hot sauce to taste
1/2 cup or so coarse dry bread crumbs such as panko
Clarified butter or olive oil for sautéing
Tarragon aioli (recipe follows)
Tarragon sprigs
2 ounces fresh salmon caviar, rinsed in cold water, optional

Gently squeeze the crab to get rid of any excess moisture and combine with next 7 ingredients. Stir in 1/2 cup of the bread crumbs. Don't over mix. You want the cakes to just hold together and be delicate in texture. Mix in additional crumbs if mixture is too moist. (Try a tester to make sure).

Form into 6 cakes. Lightly dust both sides with additional bread crumbs and sauté in clarified butter or oil until lightly browned on both sides, about 3 minutes per side. Serve with a little dollop of aioli on top with the tarragon sprigs and the salmon caviar.

Tarragon Aioli

Makes about 3/4 cup

3 large blanched garlic cloves
1 tablespoon or so olive oil
3/4 cup mayonnaise
1 tablespoon chopped tarragon
Drops of lemon juice to taste

Add all ingredients to a mini food processor and pulse till smooth. Store refrigerated for at least 1 hour to allow flavors to blend before using.

CRAB AND CORN CHOWDER WITH BACON AND WILD MUSHROOMS

Serves 6 – 8

This is a rich soup, definitely a meal in a bowl! Don't be scared by the length of the ingredient list. It's really pretty straight forward. You can use frozen corn kernels, but you won't have the cobs to make the flavorful stock.

6 medium ears of fresh sweet corn
2 cups or so chicken stock
4 cups heavy cream
2 tablespoons olive oil
6 ounces slab bacon cut into 1/4-inch dice
1-1/2 cups finely diced onion

1-1/2 cups finely diced leeks, including some of the tender green part
3/4 cup diced celery
1 teaspoon whole fennel seed
3 cups diced waxy potatoes
2 tablespoons butter
3 cups (6 ounces) cleaned wild mushrooms such as chanterelle or oyster, thickly sliced
Salt and freshly ground pepper
1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves (1/2 teaspoon dried)
3 tablespoons dry or medium dry sherry, or to taste
1-pound crab meat, picked over to remove any shell
2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley

Cut corn from the cob and set aside (you should have 5 cups or so). Add the cobs to a deep sauce pan along with the stock and cream and bring to a simmer and simmer for 5 minutes. Off heat and set aside.

Add the oil to a heavy soup pot and over moderately high heat sauté the bacon until browned and crisp. Remove bacon and set aside to drain on paper towels. Discard all but 3 tablespoons of fat from the pot and stir in the onion, leeks, celery and fennel seed and sauté until vegetables are crisp-tender. Add potatoes and stir. Remove and discard the cobs from the cream mixture and strain into pot with the vegetables. Bring to a simmer and cook until potatoes are barely tender, about 10 minutes. Add the corn and simmer for a couple of minutes more.

Meantime melt butter in a sauté pan over medium heat. Sauté the mushrooms until tender and season with salt, pepper and thyme leaves. Add mushrooms to soup along with sherry. Correct seasoning to your taste. Thin if desired with additional stock or cream.

Gently warm the crab in the mushroom skillet and divide among warm soup plates along with the reserved bacon and parsley. Ladle the soup over and serve immediately.

CRAB RICE PAPER ROLLS

Makes 12 rolls

Vietnamese in origin these Salad Rolls are easy to make and a fun alternative for a DIY party with friends and family. You'll need to make a visit to one of the many local Asian markets in the area for some of the ingredients.

2 ounces thin rice stick noodles (often labeled vermicelli)
1 medium cucumber
2 firm ripe avocados
12 - 8 to 9-inch rice paper rounds, softened (see method below)
3/4-pound fresh cooked crab meat, picked over to remove any shell fragments

3 tablespoons or so drained sweet pickled ginger
1/4 cup finely sliced green onion or garlic chives
1/3 cup loosely packed mint or cilantro leaves
2 tablespoons lightly toasted sesame seeds

Dipping Sauce (recipe follows)

Soften rice stick in hot water for 10 minutes then cook until tender in boiling water for a minute or so. Drain and rinse in cold water to stop cooking. Set aside covered loosely with plastic wrap.

Peel and seed the cucumber and cut into thin 4-inch long strips either with a mandolin or by hand. Peel the avocado, discard pit and cut into long slices.

For each roll lay out a softened rice paper on a clean surface and place a tablespoon or so of the softened rice stick across the bottom third of the round. Top with some cucumber, crab, pickled ginger, green onion and a couple of mint leaves. Sprinkle with sesame seeds. Roll the bottom of the paper up over the filling and then roll it up gently but firmly, folding in the sides as you go. The paper will seal by sticking to itself. Repeat with remaining wrappers and filling. Serve the rolls cut in half with dipping sauce on the side.

Spicy Dipping Sauce

Makes about 1-3/4 cup

1/2 cup fresh lime juice
5 tablespoons Asian fish sauce
2 teaspoons minced red jalapeno or bird chile, or to taste
2 teaspoons finely minced garlic
1 tablespoon rice vinegar
5 tablespoons sugar or to taste
1 tablespoon cilantro leaves, coarsely chopped

Combine all ingredients and stir until sugar is dissolved. Let stand at least 30 minutes before serving for flavors to develop

Softening Rice papers: Dip the dry rice paper into a bowl of hot tap water for 20 – 30 seconds or until they just begin to soften. Lay them out on a clean, dry, hard surface and they will soften further as you lay the filling on. You can do 2 or 3 at a time.

CRAB HUSH PUPPIES

Makes 20 – 30

According to legend it was devised by hunters in the south, who would throw an occasional fritter to their hunting dogs to keep them quiet.

6 cups oil for frying
2 cups yellow cornmeal
1 cup all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons baking powder
2 tablespoons sugar
1 tablespoon salt
1 – 2 tablespoons of your favourite hot sauce
2 large eggs
1-1/2 cups milk
6 large scallions, thinly sliced
2 tablespoons butter
1-pound jumbo lump crab meat
Dipping sauce

Heat oil in a 4- to 5-quart heavy pot over high heat until it registers 350°F on a deep fry thermometer.

While oil is heating, stir together cornmeal, flour, baking powder, sugar and salt in a bowl. In a separate bowl whisk hot sauce, egg and milk in a small bowl, then add to cornmeal mixture and stir until combined. Fold in crab meat. Sauté scallions in butter until soft and stir into batter.

Using two teaspoons and working in batches, carefully add 1 rounded teaspoon of batter per hush puppy to hot oil and fry, turning, until golden, 2 to 3 minutes, then transfer with a slotted spoon to paper towels to drain briefly. Transfer hush puppies to a shallow baking pan and keep hot in 250-degree oven while frying remaining batter. Return oil to 350°F between batches.

Note: You can also cheat using any good cornbread mix. Just follow directions and add crab, scallions and hot pepper or sauce. Test one to be sure batter holds together. If not, add a bit of flour.

Serve immediately with dipping sauce of your choice.

DASHI SOUP WITH CRAB AND TOFU

Serves 4 to 6

As a short cut, you can use commercial dashi granules, but I think it's so much better to make your own dashi and that's what I've done in the recipe below. Dashi ingredients are available at most Asian markets.

One 3-inch piece kombu seaweed
4 1/2 cups cold water
2 cups bonito shavings (1 ounce)
3 tablespoons light soy sauce
1 tablespoon mirin
6 ounces silken tofu, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
1/2-pound fresh steamed crab meat, picked over for errant shells
Mitsuba or tender celery leaves for garnish

In a medium saucepan, cover the kombu with the water and let stand for 1 hour.

Preheat the oven to 300°. Bring the water to a simmer over moderate heat and remove the kombu before it boils. Add the bonito and simmer for 1 minute. Cover the saucepan, remove from the heat and let stand for 10 minutes. Strain the dashi through cheesecloth into another saucepan and add the soy sauce and mirin.

Arrange the tofu cubes and crabmeat in ovenproof bowls and warm in the oven for about 3 minutes. Bring the dashi to a simmer. Pour the hot dashi into the bowls, garnish with the mitsuba or celery leaves and serve right away.

DUNGENESS CRAB, CABBAGE AND APPLE SALAD

Serves 6

You could substitute mango for the apple. The walnut oil vinaigrette is especially tasty with this and worth the effort.

24 Belgian Endive leaves, about the same size
3 cups very finely shredded green cabbage
1 large tart sweet apple such as Gala, peeled, cored and thinly sliced
1/4 cup lightly toasted pistachios or slivered almonds
1/2 cup or so Walnut Oil Vinaigrette (recipe follows)

1-pound fresh cooked Dungeness crab meat picked over to remove any bits of shell plus 6 claw meat portions
2 ounces fresh salmon roe, rinsed (optional but nice)
Fresh daikon sprouts or micro greens

Place four endive leaves arranged in a square in the center of each plates. In a medium bowl combine cabbage, apples and pistachios and toss with a couple of tablespoons of the Walnut Oil vinaigrette. Mound in the center of each endive square. Toss the crab meat with a bit of the vinaigrette and place on top of cabbage mixture along with a claw-meat portion on top. Drizzle a bit more of the vinaigrette overall and top with a heaping teaspoon of the caviar and a few sprouts artfully arranged.

Walnut Oil Vinaigrette

Makes approximately 1-1/2 cups

Use a toasted walnut oil that has a rich nutty flavor. Generally, the best and most fragrant oils come from France. The use of stock here helps reduce the fat content a bit and results in a “creamy” vinaigrette. Reduced stocks are a great way generally to lower the fat in salad dressings.

1/4 cup chopped shallots or green onions (white portion only)
1 tablespoon blanched, chopped garlic
1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
1/2 cup rich chicken stock
2 tablespoons sherry vinegar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1/2 - 2/3 cup toasted walnut oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper
2 tablespoons chopped fresh herbs such as dill, tarragon, parsley, chives or a combination

Add the shallots, garlic, lemon zest and juice, stock, vinegar and mustard in a blender and purée till smooth. With motor running, gradually add walnut oil to form a smooth creamy vinaigrette. Add more oil if a thicker vinaigrette is desired. Adjust seasoning to your taste with salt and pepper and stir in herbs. Store covered in refrigerator up to 2 days.

John Ash © 2018