

# CLAWS CÉLÈBRE

Some of Baltimore's finest restaurants offer great opportunities to try your hand at the fine art of Maryland blue crab feasting

BY LAURA E. REILEY

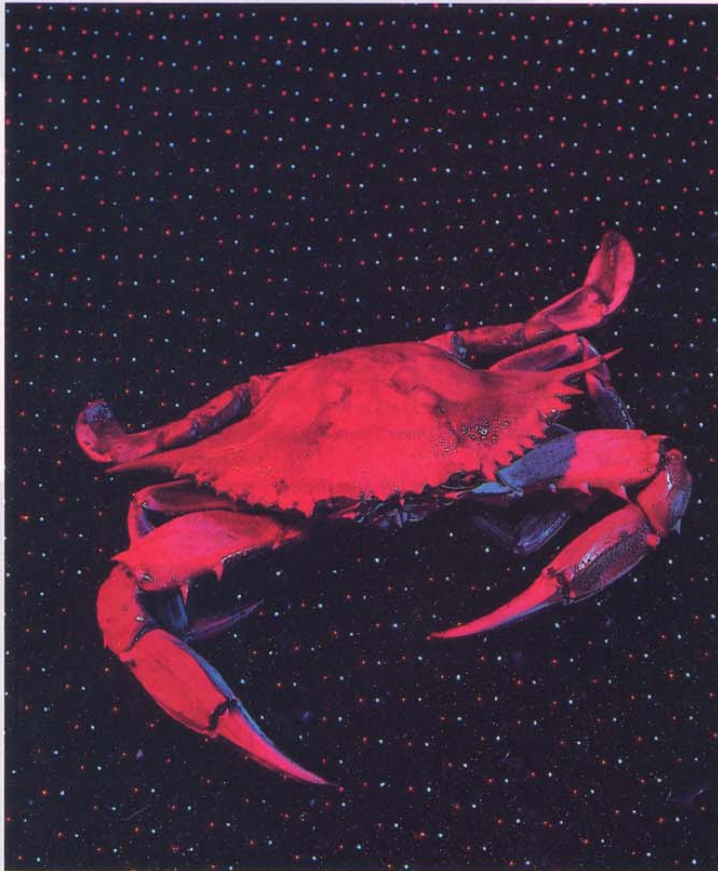


PHOTO BY ROBERT MILLER

August may herald the real dog days of summer, but Baltimore has a number of things to look forward to this month. It's Maryland blue crab season, for one. If you listen closely, you can hear the sound of mallets pounding the carapaces of this succulent delicacy all over the area. It's a rough-and-tumble sport that takes a bit of practice, but once you've mastered the art of plowing through a jumble of hot, spiced crabs strewn across an expanse of brown paper, you've cornered a little section of heaven. What follows

is a round-up of some of Baltimore's more renowned crab houses, along with how-to instructions for the neophyte.

## ALL HANDS ON DECK

Last summer the folks at Bohager's, one of Baltimore's most lively Fells Point watering holes, decided to try their hand at crabs. **The Boathouse and Crab Deck** met with wild success, and reopened this spring for a second season. With a little man-made beach, palm trees and tropical plants, and ceiling fans fitted into

the tin-roofed overhang, you may feel you've left this maritime neighborhood in Baltimore for a jaunt in the Caribbean.

Now that crab season is in full swing, the Boathouse offers Maryland hardshells most days in three different sizes and price ranges, from a dozen smalls to a dozen larges or even jumbos. Tuesday and Wednesday evenings feature an all-you-can-eat crab special. For one low price, patrons enjoy crabs, corn on the cob and a cup of zesty Maryland crab soup, redolent of tomato and lump crabmeat. The steamed crabs are coated with thick, black peppery seasoning that is spicy without overwhelming the sweetness of the crabmeat. The heat can easily be quenched by a cold beer or tall iced tea brought by the attentive, young service staff.

The menu includes a number of other fine accompaniments to the main attraction. One of locals' favorites are the fried pepper rings—something of a Baltimore crab house staple. Desserts are worth skipping that one last crab for, and range from cheesecake to a homey apple pie. (515 S. Eden St. 675-3808.)

## BO KNOWS CRABS

**Bo Brooks Crabhouse** is perhaps Baltimore's most legendary crab emporium. This has little to do with the decor or ambiance. It's a cavernous, dark restaurant with utilitarian brown paper on the tables, orange plastic chairs, "dump" buckets placed strategically to accommodate mountains of empty shells, and rolls of paper towels on tables for folks who erroneously think that, with enough diligence, their hands will stay clean.

No, what has made this restaurant the pride of Baltimore for the past 18 years can be summed up in one word: crabs. This is where you come for a raucous initiation into the rite of crab picking. The mallets are worn from countless enthusiasts pounding away at a pile of hardshell crabs coated with a lip-numbing



combination of red pepper, coarse salt and other seasonings.

Begin a meal with a bowl of cream of crab soup or dark, rich Maryland crab soup dotted with crab and celery. The house salad is simple and satisfying, and segues nicely into a pile of piping-hot crabs. Offered in several prices and sizes, the crustaceans are given a little extra verve by being steamed in beer (which also happens to be the beverage of choice for most crab hounds). Side dishes such as cole slaw, potato salad and sautéed mushroom caps are well executed and straightforward accompaniments. And desserts include a fine house-made strawberry pie and a decadent peanut butter pie. (5415 Belair Rd. 488-8144.)

#### AYE AYE, CAP'N

There are nautical-themed restaurants, and then there are nautical-themed restaurants. Some places put a little fishing net up on the wall, throw in a couple of life preservers for good measure, and call it a wrap. **Captain James Landing** blows those restaurants right out of the proverbial water. This place, located in the waterfront neighborhood of Canton, is actually fashioned as a large ship, prow to stern, starboard to port. Inside, the service staff sports mates' duds. But unlike most ships, and most restaurants for that matter, Captain James serves food 24 hours a day.

In keeping with the decor, the menu showcases Maryland seafood, from fish to steamed crabs, which are available Memorial Day to Labor Day. A meal may start with the thick fisherman's chowder, a sweet crabmeat cocktail or a tangle of golden fried calamari. Entrées cover a lot of ground—from Maine lobsters to veal Oscar or sautéed crab Norfolk. Because the owners are Greek, a number of fine Greek specialties grace the menu: try *souvlaki*, spinach pie or housemade baklava. During the month of August, a sure thing for lunch or dinner are the steamed Maryland crabs, offered in different sizes. The setting is a perfect backdrop for a pile of the creatures laden with a coating that isn't too fiery. (2127 Boston St. 327-8600.)

#### CHRISTMAS ALL SUMMER

A suburban standby in the charming town of Ellicott City, **Crab Shanty** is about as frenetic as any local crab bazaar. It sports a very respectable piano bar, and the decorative flourish of a sled used in *White Christmas* gives it a surreal Christmas-all-year atmosphere. Even when it's wiltingly hot outside, this place lends a little winter holiday cheer.

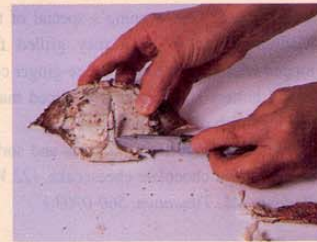
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## INSERT TAB A IN SLOT B

August marks the real beginning of the season for Chesapeake Bay blue crab, or *Callinectes sapidus*, Greek for beautiful swimmer. You needn't have a formal introduction to enjoy making your way through a pile of the delicacy, but a brief how-to lesson may improve your yield.



1. Hold the crab red side up and, ever so gently, pull down and break off the various legs right where they join the body. Sometimes the meat from the legs (especially the two front claws) will stay attached to the body and can be easily pulled out and consumed.



2. Turn the crab over and look for the tab. Females, or sooks, have a rounded tab and the males, or jimmies, have a longer, pointier tab. Put a fingernail or knife under it and lift up. This gives you access to the shell. Lift the top shell off and turn the crab right-side up.



3. Remove the feathery lungs with a knife and scrape out the "mustard" and the other entrails. Then, with a very sharp knife, cut off the "knuckles," or little knobs where the claws were attached to the body. This releases the meat inside the shell.



4. Break the crab in half right down the middle of the spine. With a sharp knife, cut across and separate the top and bottom half, yielding four body pieces full of meat. The meat may be removed in large chunks.

5. In order to remove the leg meat, use a mallet to gently tap a knife into the joints of the legs. Open the joints carefully and the meat should slide out whole. The brilliant orange-red cooked crabs are equipped with five pairs of legs. The front pair are large, meaty claws and the small back pair are virtually meatless swimmerettes.

On a Saturday night, locals are content to line up and wait for an opportunity to wield their mallets on a crab or two.

The Crab Shanty's menu is broad, extending far beyond simple steamed crabs. The cream of crab soup always garners raves, as do the crabcakes and the daily specials of broiled fish topped with a variety of sauces. The seafood sampler provides an opportunity to try numerous fruits of the sea, but a majority of Baltimoreans will recommend the Crab Shanty for their crabs.

Maryland hardshell crabs are often just a bit more expensive here than at several other

popular crab houses, offered by the dozen in small, medium or large. They are expertly steamed and spiced, with ineffably tender meat. If you have any room left over, the housemade chocolate mousse is a bang-up end to a meal. (3410 Plumtree Dr., Ellicott City. 465-9660.)

#### GOT IT LaMADE

The Maryland crabhouse is a primal place, one of coarse brown paper and crude wooden mallets. Chef Eric LaMade and owner Charlie Gibby take great pains to make **Gibby's Seafood Restaurant** a kinder, gentler, more

PHOTOS BY BOB WILLIS

refined crabhouse. Yes, customers can still pound the red crustacean carapaces with reckless abandon, but they can also choose from an inventive menu of soups, salads and seafood dishes.

The shellfish appetizers are a satisfying introduction to the restaurant. A meal may start with traditional shrimp or crabmeat cocktail, plump golden crabcakes or oysters Rockefeller. If you plan to wrestle the sweet, succulent meat from steamed crabs as your entrée, a simple salad may be more in order to begin your meal. A spinach Florentine salad and the house tossed salad of green leaf lettuce, julienned carrots, peppers, cucumber and cherry tomatoes are both expertly rendered. More substantial seafood salads make appealing light entrées. The Louis salad, made with either shrimp or crab, comes on a bed of crisp shredded lettuce, tomato and cucumber, with a tangy housemade Louis dressing.

Some of the best dishes are the fresh fish presentations offered on the regular menu and on a list of daily specials. Chef LaMade calls upon his training at the Culinary Institute of America to sauce the delicate fish flown in from Florida and various coastal cities on a weekly basis. One evening's special of tuna Madina proved to be a rosy grilled fillet topped with key lime and orange-ginger compound butters and served with sliced mango and a garnish of snow peas and melon.

Desserts range from mousses and sorbets to a decadent chocolate cheesecake. (22 West Padonia Rd., Timonium. 560-0703.)

#### GO FOR YOUR GUN

It's just you and the mallet versus a steaming pile of just-cooked crabs. **Gunning's Crab House** knows that folks will come from as far away as New York to this spot in the neighborhood of Brooklyn, *Maryland*, just over the Hanover Street Bridge, to spend an hour or two in unadulterated seafood worship. This is not to say that Gunning's scrimps on the other details. The dining room may not be much to look at, and neither is the new patio with its festive colored lanterns, but Gunning's practically pioneered the art of crab accompaniments.

The fried green pepper rings, dipped in a sweet, puffy batter and lightly dusted with powdered sugar are the perfect foil for crabs, as are the onion rings, the clove-scented sweet cucumber salad and the cole slaw. But none of these can eclipse the sweet, hefty local crabs that are offered in August by the dozen. Coarse black pepper infuses the crabs with a

**N**ow that you have mastered the fine art of crab dismantling, you may need a few more suggestions for places to strut your stuff. The following establishments, located all over the greater Baltimore area, offer fine opportunities for a crab caper or two:

A-1 Crab Haven—1600 Old Eastern Ave., Essex. 687-6000.

The Barn—9527 Harford Rd., Carney. 882-6182.

—Cantler's Riverside Inn—458 Forest Beach Rd., Annapolis. 410-757-1311.

Capt. Harry's Ridge Crab House—4569 Ridge Rd., Parkville. 661-6622.

Carney's Crab House—2014 E. Joppa Rd. 665-5000.

C.J.'s Restaurant—10117 Reisterstown Rd., Owings Mills. 363-6694.

Crackpot—8102 Loch Raven Blvd., near Towson. 828-1095.

Faidley Seafood—Lexington Market, 400 W. Paca St. 727-4898.

Glenmore Garden—4813 Belair Rd. 488-2366.

Gunning's Seafood Restaurant—7304 Parkway Dr., Hanover. 410-712-9404.

Harris Crab House—Kent Narrows (Exit 42 off of Route 50), Grasonville. 410-827-9500.

Mo's Crab and Pasta Factory—502 Albemarle St. 837-1600.

Nick's Inner Harbour Seafood—Cross Street Market, 1065 S. Charles St. 685-2020.

Obrycki's—1727 E. Pratt St., Fells Point. 732-6399.

Ocean Pride Restaurant—1534 York Rd., Lutherville. 321-7744.

Penny's—1115 N. Rolling Rd. 788-4666.

Pier 5—Pier 5 Clarion Inn, 711 Eastern Ave. 783-5553.

Phillips—Light Street Pavilion, Harborplace. 685-6600.

River Watch—207 Manticoke Rd., Essex. 687-1422.

Rusty Scupper—402 Key Highway, Inner Harbor. 727-3678.

Schultz's Crab House—1732 Old Eastern Ave., Essex. 687-1020.

Sea Pride Crab House—201 S. Monroe St. 624-3222.

fair amount of heat, and over an evening diners' hands and lips pay the price for so much close proximity to the spice—the funny thing is, no one seems to care! If the thought is daunting, you may opt for Gunning's crab fluff or superlative crabcakes. But, as they say, no pain, no gain. After about an hour or two wrestling with hardshell crabs, you may even be prepared to tackle the monster chocolate éclair. (3901 S. Hanover St., Brooklyn. 354-0085.) ■