

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

When Blue Turns to Red

These beautiful red-orange crustaceans below are actually known as blue crabs. They are native to the western coastline of the Atlantic Ocean all the way from Nova Scotia to Argentina, including the entire coast of the Gulf of Mexico.



They were harvested by David Mayer after a previously successful fishing trip made by him and other members of his family. David, his "son-in-law, Ryan Gootie and grandkids, Grace and Harrison Gootie", ended up a few months ago with "lots of speckled trout caught at Bayou St. Malo and Lake Borgne".

And we "had to clean all those specs. We saved the heads and guts in large zip-locks, froze 'em and waited for the crabs to come in," David said.

This past Saturday, "we ran the ten (10) Mayer traps and SHAZAMM!!!... WE LOADED UP ON 3 1/2 DOZEN BEAUTIFUL BLUE CRABS, FAT, PACKED AND FANTASTIC."

"On the previous Thursday afternoon, the Whaler was loaded with the traps, baited and launched," he continued. "We cruised in the waning hours of dusk to the Marquis Bayou toward Lake Catherine, found an empty stretch along the wrecked piers and gazebos and dropped those puppies gently in the beautiful water. Drank a few cold ones and headed back ..."

"We cooked the crabs on Sunday morning in my back yard; salt, cayenne pepper, a little garlic, bay leaf and 3 or 4 lemons. Boiled for 10 minutes, soaked for 40 minutes," Crab Chef Mayer explained. The finished product is displayed in the photo above.

As a postscript, Mayer reloaded his crab traps (this time with "turkey necks in the bait compartment") and threw all ten traps back in the water. "Yep," confessed Mayer, "I'm still crabbin' on Sunday morning on the way to church."

These beautiful and savory swimmers, *Callinectes sapidus* (from the Greek *calli*, for "beautiful" *nectes*, for "swimmer", and Latin *sapidus*, for "savory"), are known as the Chesapeake or Atlantic blue crab (even though they are omnipresent along our Gulf shores). They can also be found on the Pacific coast of Central America and have been introduced (via ballast water) to Japanese and European waters, including the Mediterranean Sea, Baltic Sea, North Sea and Black Sea. In Maryland, the blue crab is super-popular and their crab cakes are formidable (with a high percentage of delicious lump crabmeat).

So how is it, inquiring minds want to know, that blue crabs turn bright red-orange when they're boiled?

The crab's blue coloring is a result of a number of pigments in the shell, including *alpha-crustacyanin*, which interacts with its red pigment, *astaxanthin*, to form a greenish-blue hue. The greens, blues and browns, which darken the shell in a live blue crab, are destroyed by cooking. During this process the *alpha-crustacyanin* breaks down, leaving only the *astaxanthin*, which turns the crab red-orange. The red pigment is the most stable component of the coloring in a crab shell.

Callinectes sapidus is a member of the *Brachyura*, an order of crustaceans having a reduced abdomen, or "apron", folded against the animal's ventral surface (or belly). And it's these "aprons" that allow one to quickly determine the gender and maturity of the blue crab.

Most New Orleanians have little trouble in picking out the male or female crabs by this method. The male blue crab, or "Jimmy", has a long and narrow "apron" (somewhat T-shaped). A mature (adult) she-crab, known as a "Sook" to crabbers, is identified as having an inverted "U" or bell-shaped "apron" (referred to as the Capitol dome to

crab lovers in Virginia and Maryland). Her broadly rounded abdomen is free to open and is not sealed shut as an immature female, or "Sally". The mature female blue crab must open her "apron" in order to mate and to carry eggs (thus becoming a pregnant "Sponge Crab"). This gravid, or roe-bearing, she-crab provides the ingredients for the rich bisque known as "she-crab soup", a regional specialty served along the South Carolina Low Country and Georgia coast.

The "Sally" is less familiar to the novice. She is easily identified, however, as having an inverted "V" or triangular shaped "apron", tightly sealed to her body since she cannot mate or carry eggs.

But here's an easy means of gender identification. Males have blue claws, and, like most ladies, female blue crabs (both "Sallies" and "Sooks") have their fingernails painted (i.e., the tips of their claws are "painted" red by Mother Nature).

The late Phil Johnson wrote how the French in New Orleans were different from New Englanders, "they knew how to live. They brought with them their great, gusty, sensual, even vulgar attitudes towards life and living. They treated sin not as something to be avoided, but simply as that which comes just before redemption. And their cuisine was sublime, their chefs, magicians. No bony, oily rockfish here to flavor the Bouillabaisse. So they used salty oysters and blue crabs and Gulf shrimp and made gumbo instead. Their legacy: superb food, an attitude of *laissez faire*, and the inclination – alive today – to lose ourselves in the glories of the past that we tend to neglect the present and forego the future."

This author remembers fondly countless delicacies containing our beloved blue crabs: fried or sautéed soft shell crabs (the ones that have molted their previous exoskeleton and are still soft, appearing in markets from April to September); Crabmeat Ravigote; various salads or cocktails employing lump crabmeat (Café Minh on Canal and the High Hat on Freret serve theirs with watermelon – fabulous!); Crabmeat Au Gratin and Crabmeat Imperial at the Bon Ton (also Soft Shell Crab Alvin, Topped with Crabmeat!); Crabmeat Yvonne and Crabmeat Maison at Galatoire's; Crabmeat Louie; stuffed crabs in their own shells (or those aluminum replicas); and all those wonderful hot crabmeat dips at New Orleans parties. Ralph's on the Park has a fantastic tempura soft shell crab with hoisin sauce this summer. And how about the wonderful recipes we enjoy at home, the stuffed eggplant, pepper, tomato or mirliton? Crabmeat is a key ingredient. My mom made a wonderful dish of sweet blue crab claw meat sautéed with seasoned breadcrumbs.

Some of us have happy recollections of crabbing with chicken necks tied to the centers of crab nets. These circular metal rings with netted interiors were usually lowered from bridges or piers. This author has vivid memories of running out on weekends and holidays on to Bay St.

Louis in a small aluminum Jon boat, five horsepower outboard and five crab traps. I left in the morning and harvested in the late afternoon. A couple of dozen crabs later, it was time for the boiling preparation. I rinsed the crabs off well and purged them in salt water for about thirty minutes in an ice chest. That got them to release any undigested material before cooking.

David Mayer seasoned his crabs a bit differently than I did. I'd cut up celery, onions, lemons, and add whole garlic, ample salt, pepper, cayenne and crab boil (usually Zatarain's). Crab boil is a blend of spices that comes in porous boil-in bag or liquid form. One bag takes care of a dozen crabs. Old Bay crab boil is the classic for Maryland or Virginia crabs, but Zatarain's or Rex is for those of us who prefer Creole or Cajun seasoning. I'd drop the crabs in one at a time and be careful not to overcrowd the pot. My method was to always bring the crabs to a second boil, then shut down the boiling process along with some ice on top, and let them soak up the seasoning. The joy of dining on these red-orange creatures was always the best part. Lots of great conversations transpired in Pass Christian while crab claw crackers furtively fanned out from their fulcrums.

Many a wonderful crab feast took place for my family, as I'm sure it did for many other Crescent City crab lovers, especially on Friday evenings out by West End. It's all blown away by Katrina and other hurricanes, but (in its day) the West End restaurants were a seafood lover's paradise. Every family had their favorite place to go: Maggie and Smitty's Fontana's, Bruning's or Fitzgerald's. Today, Sid-Mar has reopened just off Vets on North Turnbull and serves up boiled crabs and other great seafood dishes. In fact, a boiled red crab graces their sign. But for my family, back when West End was alive and kickin', it was Swanson's.

Swanson's operated in West End Park from the 1940s until 1982. The owners would have described their location as where the "East End" of Jefferson Parish meets the "West End" of New Orleans. We'd come upon the four columns with "Swanson's" in script above the covered front entrance, and knew there would be delicious food inside. We'd walk in past the mechanical white horse for the kids to tables piled high with delights from our Gulf waters. For my mom and dad, it was always the boiled crabs. I was young and ordered the open-faced fried trout sandwich in those days. Waitresses came out of the kitchen and paid for the orders before delivering the food to the tables. That was one way to keep customers from leaving without paying the bill.

Swanson's proprietors were the late Frank Swanson and his wife, Julia Pfieffer Swanson. And the remarkable thing is, when I asked David Mayer's permission to share his story and photo, he answered back:

"Very pleased to. Share it, Ned."

And he signed his name, "Frank & Julia Swanson's grandson, David F. Mayer".

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