



CRABS

Applause embarrasses a blue crab so much that when it is caught and boiled it turns bright red.

Joy is a pile of boiled Louisiana blue crabs. In other places savvy folks have discovered the superiority of Louisiana blue crabs and now demand that they be shared and shipped around the country. When there is a shortage, I take this shipping-sharing thing personally. I want to keep them home. Preferably at my house.

Fine crabmeat has a fresh, delicate flavor reminiscent of the waters where the crabs grew up, and around New Orleans, that's almost buttery. That's why we try to do as little as possible to crabmeat, enhancing rather than overpowering its natural flavor.

Crabs live in hard, protective shells except at a certain time of the year when crabs abandon the old houses and build larger, new houses, which harden quickly. That's when soft-shell crabs are in season and another reason to head to a favorite restaurant, to the nearest fish market, or to the end of the dock with a chicken neck and net to go crabbing. Fried or sautéed soft-shell crabs are the stars at most tables. People allergic to crabmeat should sit next to me at dinner.

Crabs are sold live, boiled, or steamed. They are purchased whole, graded by size, or as pure crabmeat picked by a noble person. Do pick through the crabmeat carefully, to catch the bits of shell and cartilage that the official picker may have missed. The containers will be labeled jumbo, special, or claws and fingers.

Rarely seen, but greatly appreciated are small buster crabs. There are old-time crab farmers who catch the tiny crabs and place them in large tanks. There they stay, swimming with the farmer watching as a benevolent life guard until they shed their hard shell. These babies, gently sautéed in a classic meunière sauce and served on a piece of buttered toast can make the most blasé guest beg like a puppy.

We prefer the seasoning mixture known as crab boil, which we also use for shrimp and crawfish.

Anything else tastes funny to us.



MARTI'S CRAB BISQUE

Straight from the dock at hunting camp comes crab bisque with finesse and flavor. The beauty of the bisque is its subtle richness that doesn't overwhelm the delicate crabmeat. I prefer the jumbo lump, as opposed to the smaller grades of crabmeat because it is a luxurious dish and should be treated as a special occasion. This recipe provides 6 servings, but the same quantity and richness would serve 12 in demitasse cups as a lovely starter.

SERVES: 6

1/4 cup	unsalted butter	1 pint	heavy cream
3 tablespoons	all-purpose flour	1 teaspoon	thyme, finely chopped
1 pound	jumbo crabmeat	1 teaspoon	kosher salt
3 tablespoons	onions, finely chopped	1/8 teaspoon	white pepper
1 tablespoon	celery, finely chopped	1/8 teaspoon	cayenne pepper
1 quart	whole milk	1/4 cup	parsley, chopped

DIRECTIONS

Clean the crabmeat carefully to remove any remaining shell or cartilage. Be careful not to break the lumps. Reserve 6 jumbo lumps as garnish for each serving.

Make a blond roux by melting the butter and gradually stirring in the flour over a medium heat. Lower the heat if it seems to be turning color. Stir continuously and do not allow the mixture to brown, about 5-10 minutes.

Add the onions and celery. Cook, continuing to stir, until the onions are translucent, about 5-10 minutes.

Gradually add the milk and cream, stirring constantly, and continue to cook as it thickens. Add thyme, salt, pepper, and cayenne. Taste and adjust seasonings as desired. Carefully add crabmeat to the bisque and allow the crabmeat to warm through, about 2 minutes. In a small sauté pan, warm the reserved jumbo lumps and set aside.

For garnish, sprinkle with chopped parsley and float a large piece of jumbo lump on top.



Marti Shambra was passionate about top hats and tall tales, and he held forth of any manner of subjects from design to designing escapades as an artist and social creature, attracting literati, the theater crowd, Quarterites, and the media people. He adored delicious gossip and snacked on adversaries.

He ruled Marti's, the first of the French Quarter bistros that provided a snappy, late night, casual hangout for the locals, one of whom was Tennessee Williams. He lived around the corner and was unnoticed or, at least, undisturbed by other guests. Marti's suited him.

Marti Shambra was far more interested in maintaining a salon than cooking but he demanded a good menu, so he wisely installed his family's hunting-camp cook in the kitchen and left him alone. He got wonderful food and great conversation.

Chef Henry Robinson presented solid fare. It was simple, down-home goodness. There was nothing tricky, nothing fancy, nothing tortured into unnatural culinary acts. I usually started with the crab bisque if it was on the daily special blackboard.

Following Marti's too-early passing in 1988, the bistro was renamed Peristyle, after the bar's mural of City Park, circa 1911, from the old DeSoto Hotel and continues to be an acclaimed establishment.





PALACE CAFE

CRABMEAT CHEESECAKE

This recipe is so richly divine that you may want to consider serving it as an appetizer in small slices. On the other hand, your guests may fight over the scraps so perhaps it should be served as a whole piece.

SERVES: 8

PECAN CRUST

3/4 cup pecans
 1 cup all-purpose flour
 1/4 teaspoon salt
 5 tablespoons cold butter
 3 tablespoons ice water

CRABMEAT FILLING

1/2 cup onions, small diced
 1 tablespoon butter
 4 ounces crabmeat
 8 ounces cream cheese,
 room temperature
 1/3 cup Creole cream cheese
 or sour cream
 2 large eggs
 1 tablespoon Louisiana hot sauce
 to taste kosher salt and cracked
 white pepper

MEUNIÈRE SAUCE

1 lemon, peeled and quartered
 1/2 cup Worcestershire sauce
 1/2 cup Louisiana hot sauce
 1/4 cup heavy whipping cream
 1 pound cold butter, cut into cubes
 to taste kosher salt and cracked
 white pepper

GARNISH

2 cups sliced mixed wild
 mushrooms
 3 tablespoons butter, softened
 24 crab claw fingers
 to taste kosher salt and cracked
 black pepper

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350°F. Finely grind pecans in a food processor. Add flour and salt. Mix well. Transfer to a large mixing bowl and cut butter into flour with two knives until dough is in crumbs the size of small peas. Add ice water and evenly incorporate, which should remain fairly crumbly. Roll out dough to 1/8 inch thickness on a lightly floured surface. Press dough into a lightly greased 9-inch tart pan, starting with the sides and then the bottom. Bake crust for 20 minutes, or until golden brown. Reset oven to 300°F.

Note: Dough can be made ahead of time. If doing so, wrap the dough tightly in plastic wrap and refrigerate. Allow dough to come to room temperature before rolling it out.

Sauté onions in butter until translucent. Add crabmeat and cook just until heated through, then remove from heat. Blend cream cheese until smooth in a mixer fitted with a paddle, or by hand using a wooden spoon. Add Creole cream cheese and mix well. Mix in the eggs one at a time. Gently fold in crabmeat mixture. Stir in hot sauce and season to taste with salt and cracked white pepper. Spoon filling into prepared crust. Bake at 300°F for 30-40 minutes, or until firm to the touch.

Prepare the meunière sauce and garnish. To serve, slice cheesecake and top each piece with warm meunière sauce and three crab claws.



Following his family's ever-expanding restaurant tradition, Dickie Brennan has used his Palace Café to create dishes destined to become New Orleans' classics. He also owns Dickie Brennan's Steakhouse and Dickie Brennan's Bourbon House.

Prior to retirement, his father Dick Brennan presided over Commander's Palace with his sisters, Ella Brennan and Dottie Brennan, each bringing their own talents to the table. A raconteur, Dick's stories made every meal an event with laughter and camaraderie.

Dickie has done his family proud by serving on numerous civic committees and is one of the city's most loyal supporters.

MEUNIÈRE SAUCE AND GARNISH

Combine lemon, Worcestershire sauce, and hot sauce in a heavy saucepot. Reduce over medium heat, stirring constantly with a wire whisk until mixture becomes thick and syrupy. Whisk in heavy whipping cream. Reduce heat to low and slowly blend in butter one cube at a time, only after previously added butter has completely incorporated into the sauce. Remove from heat and continue to stir. Season with salt and cracked pepper to taste. Strain through a fine strainer and keep warm. Sauté mushrooms in 2 tablespoons of butter until tender and all moisture has cooked off. Excess water from the mushrooms may cause your sauce to separate if it isn't cooked off. Stir mushrooms into meunière sauce. Melt 1 tablespoon of butter in a sauté pan and warm crab claws over low heat.



GALATOIRE'S CRABMEAT MAISON

Crabmeat Maison at Galatoire's is their version of Crabmeat Imperial. The big difference is jumbo lumps of crabmeat, the service, and of course, the surroundings. Maison means house and the house specialty it is, indeed.

SERVES: 6

2 large	egg yolks	to taste	salt and freshly ground white pepper
2 tablespoons	red wine vinegar	1 pound	jumbo lump crabmeat
1 tablespoon	Creole mustard or any coarse grainy brown mustard	1 head	iceberg lettuce, washed, dried and cut into thin ribbons
1 teaspoon	fresh lemon juice	2 medium	vine-ripened tomatoes, cored and cut into six 1-inch thick slices
1 cup	vegetable oil	garnish	fresh parsley, chopped
1/4 cup	nonpareil capers, drained		
1/4 cup	chopped scallions, green and white parts		
1 tablespoon	curly parsley, chopped		

DIRECTIONS

Combine the egg yolks, vinegar, mustard, and lemon juice in a food processor and process for 2 minutes. With the processor running, add the oil slowly in a thin stream and process until emulsified. (Note: it will not completely mix.)

Transfer to a large mixing bowl and gently fold in the capers, scallions, and parsley. Season with salt and white pepper. Refrigerate for 2 to 4 hours.

Just before serving, gently fold in the crabmeat, taking care not to break the lumps.

Divide the lettuce among 6 serving plates and top with a slice of tomato. Spoon the crabmeat on top of the tomato slices. Garnish with fresh chopped parsley and serve.

Executive Chef Brian Landry manages Galatoire's recipes, but Galatoire's has wanted to be different since it opened in 1905. When then-Vice President Spiro Agnew stood in line like everyone else, the world knew that Galatoire's wasn't kidding about not taking reservations.

So a fun-loving patron started the rumor that if bouillabaisse was ordered in advance, a time could be set for dining. It drove the restaurant nutty, but that's the kind of silliness the city revels in. Now reservations are available for the second floor, but in another bit of silliness, first floor patrons wouldn't be caught dead there.

It is the Friday downstairs lunch crowd who pay people to wait in line for them. These are mostly the long-time customers who hold house credit cards, the lower the number, the more important the guest. When one of them dies, survivors, after an appropriate mourning period, maybe an hour, scramble for the recycled low number.

Continuing the sport, Friday before Mardi Gras is the most see-and-be-seen lunch of the year at several famous French Quarter restaurants. Galatoire's auctions off those seats.

Galatoire's on its 100th anniversary was honored by the James Beard Foundation's Outstanding Restaurant Award.





MÉLANGE AT THE RITZ-CARLTON

JUMBO LUMP CRAB CAKES

The combination of seasoned crabmeat spiked with piquanté sauce and cooled by fennel slaw is a bodacious surprise of texture and flavor.

SERVES: 6 Appetizers

SAUCE PIQUANTÉ

2 teaspoons olive oil
1 tablespoon garlic, chopped
1 tablespoon jalapeño pepper, seeded and finely chopped
1/4 cup yellow onions, finely diced
1/4 cup celery, finely diced
1/4 cup green bell pepper, finely diced
2 cups tomato juice
1 sprig fresh tarragon, chopped
1/2 cup fresh tomato, medium diced

CRAB CAKES

1/3 cup red onions, finely diced
1/4 cup red bell pepper, finely diced
1/4 cup green bell pepper, finely diced
1/2 cup mayonnaise
2 teaspoons Creole mustard
1 teaspoon prepared horseradish
1 tablespoon fresh thyme, chopped
1 cup Italian bread crumbs
1 1/2 pounds jumbo lump crabmeat
pinch cayenne pepper
to taste salt and freshly ground black pepper

FENNEL SLAW

1 cup fresh fennel bulb, thinly shaved
2 tablespoons cane vinegar

DIRECTIONS

For the sauce piquanté, heat the olive oil in a 12-inch saucepan over medium heat. Sauté the garlic, jalapeños, onions, celery, and green peppers, about 3-5 minutes. Add the tomato juice and tarragon, reduce heat. Simmer over low heat for 10 minutes. Stir in the diced fresh tomato and heat about 1 minute. Remove from the heat, and set aside.

To create the fennel slaw, toss the thinly shaved fennel bulb with the cane vinegar, and set aside.

Crab cakes must be gently handled to avoid breaking the lumps. Combine the red onions, bell peppers, mayonnaise, mustard, horseradish, fresh thyme, Italian bread crumbs, and mix well. Gently fold in the jumbo lump crabmeat. Add the cayenne pepper, salt, and freshly ground black pepper. Taste and adjust seasonings as desired.

Divide the mixture into six balls. Flatten to make the cakes. In a non-stick skillet over medium heat, sear the crab cakes on both sides, turning once.

Ladle piquanté sauce onto a serving platter or individual plates. Place the crab cakes on top of the sauce and garnish each with 1 or 2 teaspoons of the fennel slaw. Serve immediately.



When The Ritz-Carlton offered a transfer to New Orleans as general manager, Myra deGersdorff came home to where her heart lives, the city where she grew up.

"We need a New Orleans restaurant," she mused. "So why not all of them?" The theme of the hotel's reopening was about celebrating New Orleans food, music and entertainment, so to highlight the city's restaurants for guests who want a local experience was a natural.

Guests get a taste of the city and what restaurant wouldn't want to be featured to a Ritz-Carlton guest?

Mélange is pure entertainment. When the city's most heralded establishments offer their most famous dishes on one menu, it's a coming together of delicious tradition, accented by some of The Ritz-Carlton's culinary creations.

When the landmark Maison Blanche building, a former department store, was revitalized as a grand hotel, it was serendipity that the antique terra cotta exterior was festooned with lion heads, symbol of The Ritz-Carlton.



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MR. B'S SOFT-SHELL CRAB WITH MACQUE CHOUX

Mr. B's stands for Brennan's, another mighty offshoot of the restaurant group – the Commander's Palace side of the family, if you're keeping score. Managing Partner Cindy Brennan works closely with Executive Chef Michelle McRaney to provide Creole-style specialties in the French Quarter.

SERVES: 4

Macque choux has Cajun roots. Corn off the cob is the standard, but other ingredients may vary according to taste. Tomatoes and okra may be used, or simply bell peppers and onions. Some cooks add pork, others add butter. Mr. B's adds cream so that it ends up a little like Louisiana creamed corn.

MACQUE CHOUX

- 2 cups heavy whipping cream
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/2 small red onion, diced
- 1/2 medium red bell pepper, diced
- 1/2 medium green bell pepper, diced
- 3 ears fresh corn, kernels only
- to taste kosher salt
- to taste freshly ground black pepper

DIRECTIONS

In a medium saucepan simmer cream over moderately low heat until it is reduced in half, about 20 minutes.

In a 12-inch saucepan melt the butter over moderate heat. Add onions and bell peppers and cook for 3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add corn kernels and cook for 5 minutes, or until tender.

Add the reduced cream and cook 1 minute. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Keep warm until ready to serve.

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| 4 large | live soft-shell crabs | 3/4 teaspoon | granulated garlic |
| for frying | canola oil | 1/2 teaspoon | paprika |
| 2 3/4 cups | all-purpose flour | 1/2 teaspoon | chili powder |
| 1/2 cup | corn flour | 1/2 teaspoon | white pepper |
| 1/2 cup | cornstarch | 2 large | eggs |
| 1/4 cup | cornmeal | 1/2 cup | water |
| 1 teaspoon | salt | 2 cups | macque choux |
| 3/4 teaspoon | granulated onions | | (see sidebar) |

DIRECTIONS

Start by preparing the macque choux.

With a pair of kitchen scissors while holding the crab in one hand, cut off face (eyes and mouth). Cut off the little flap at the crab bottom and pull top shell sides up and cut off gills. Puncture the water sack behind the eyes and squeeze to remove water.

Heat enough oil to measure 4-inches deep in a tall, wide heavy pot to 375°F.

In a large bowl combine 3/4 cup all-purpose flour, corn flour, cornstarch, cornmeal, salt, granulated onions, garlic, paprika, chili powder, and white pepper. Mix well and set aside. In a small bowl whisk together eggs with 1/2 cup water, to form an eggwash.

Place the remaining 2 cups flour in a shallow bowl. Dredge each crab in flour, being sure to coat the legs. Dip the dredged crab in the egg wash, letting excess batter drip off. Dredge again in the corn flour mixture and shake off the excess.

Gently drop 2 crabs in the hot oil belly side up. Place a ladle on the belly of each crab and let the crab rest on the bottom of the pan, resting ladle handle against the side of the pan. Fry the crabs until golden brown about 4 minutes, making sure oil returns to 375°F before adding more crabs. Drain the crabs on paper towels. Serve warm over macque choux, belly side up.

