

Savory Swimmers

By Dan Gill

The scientific name for the native blue crab is *Callinectes*, Greek for beautiful swimmer, and *sapidus*, Latin meaning tasty or savory. Every spring the shores of the Chesapeake Bay region are littered with small, empty crab shells as young blue crab peelers seek the relative safety of shallow water to shed and, hopefully, get to be big crabs. Tender and sweet and delicious to eat, the soft crab is sought, not only by us, but also by just about everything that swims, crawls or flies - including other crabs. This is why there are so many croakers, and occasionally rockfish, in shallow water during the spring and early summer: They are much better at catching soft crabs than we are.

When I was coming along, we caught soft crabs along the shore and in the eelgrass beds with a dip net. We would go out on the tide, in the evening or early morning, and either pole a special "crabbing skiff" equipped with a built-in live well, or walk along in shallow water pulling a bushel basket stuck in an old inner tube. We looked for holes in the sand with just two eye-stalks showing above the mud, or a log or board that crabs could hide under. We would probe likely places with the net trying to scare up whatever was hiding there. If the resident swam away fast, it was hard; but if it swam slowly, then it was soft and we'd catch it. Crabs molt all summer, but shedding peaks in May and is known as the "May run". Locals think these are the best soft crabs of the year, possibly because they are the first crabs of the year. "May run" crabs tend to be small; you can eat them in two bites. Due to a number of factors, eelgrass beds are mostly gone now; consequently, shallow waters are not as clear and hardly anyone crabs along the shores.

On a rising tide, ripe peelers move along the shallows next to shore looking for a safe place to hide and shed. If they encounter an obstacle, they try to go around by moving to deeper water. Watermen learned to take advantage of this behavior with the peeler run: a wire fence obstacle that crabs follow out - right into a trap. Traps were fished once a day (except Sunday) and the crabs were culled and separated. Ripe peelers, those showing a "pink sign" on the margin of the swimming appendage, were then placed in a shallow float in the creeks to shed. As summer progresses, the water in the creeks gets relatively warm and low in oxygen, leading to high mortality during shedding. Peeler runs and shedding floats have now been replaced by specialized crab pots and shedding tanks on shore. Recirculating water systems and biological filters, which are underground tanks filled with oyster shells, ensure consistent water quality. In the summer, water can be cooled and oxygenated to increase survival rates.

Visitors to River Country are faced with having to find good sources of local crab in "user friendly" forms. Most commercial watermen sell by the truckload to major northern markets and local restaurants, and are not inclined to stop what they are doing and sell to the public. There are a few seafood markets, scattered throughout the Bay region, that sell steamed crabs, soft shells and crabmeat to the public. Sometimes they make homemade crab cakes, deviled crabs and other local specialties for sale. These markets are usually sidelines to wholesale seafood businesses. They are often located off of the beaten path in waterfront communities and along the creeks. In the Urbanna area, there are only two remaining:

Shores & Ruark, about two miles north of Urbanna on Robinson Creek (804-758-5640) is usually open Wednesday through Saturday or by appointment (it is a good idea to call first). One of the few commercial crab steamers and pickers left in the area, Shores & Ruark has a small retail store in the building where they shed crabs. They sell live or steamed crabs by the dozen or bushel, and

their own picked crabmeat. Dianne Shores Ruark makes crab cakes and deviled crabs for sale using old family recipes straight from her Tangier Island heritage.

Payne's Crab House, on Urbanna Creek at the end of Prettyman's Rolling Road (now Old Virginia Street), sells primarily to the public. Hours are from 7:00 AM to 1:00 PM, and by appointment (804-758-5301). Operated by two sisters, Beatrice Taylor and Catherine Via (also of Tangier Island descent), Payne's sells soft crabs, steamed crabs, and backfin crabmeat. The shedding tanks are in a building right behind the small retail shack. During special events, such as the Fourth of July weekend and the Urbanna Oyster Festival, they fix crab cakes and soft crab sandwiches for sale.

Although not in the retail business, many local watermen operate their own shedding tanks and will sell soft and hard crabs by prior arrangement or if you happen to catch them at the right time. If you are really lucky, you can get "super softs" or "velvets" right out of the shedding tanks. When crabs first back out of their shells, they quickly absorb water and inflate to their new size. They are then plump and extremely soft; this is the best time to harvest them for eating within a few hours or for freezing, but they are too delicate for storage or shipping. Commercial shedders typically allow crabs to rest and strengthen for another hour or two before harvesting. These are the soft-shelled crabs typically found in stores and most restaurants, especially inland and in the cities. If they stay in the water too long, they become "paper shells," good only for bait. Watermen fish their tanks every three to four hours in order to harvest at the best stage.

Soft crabs are sold by size: The smaller "mediums" and "hotels" are popular with locals while wholesale buyers seek the larger "jumbos" and "whales." Prices vary throughout the season depending upon availability and demand. The middle size, "primes," are often the most economical to buy because, although they are approximately twice as heavy as "mediums", the price is often only 50% higher. Price per dozen usually takes a major jump for "jumbos" and "whales" because of market demand.

Don't eat the yellow stuff! Many crab lovers prize the strong flavored "fat" called mustard or tomalley. We now know that the yellow stuff, found in the body cavity of steamed or soft crabs, is not fat; instead, it is part of the digestive system and functions as both liver and pancreas. Technically a hepatopancreas, it filters impurities from the crab's blood and therefore concentrates environmental contaminants such as PCBs and heavy metals, especially when harvested from harbors and industrialized areas.

At "Something Different" we make traditional she-crab soup, crab cakes, Welsh crab melts and soft crab entrees, all from local crabs. Sometimes we have steamed crabs by the dozen and we can supply bushels by prior arrangement.

According to legend, she-crab soup was invented in Charleston, South Carolina, in the early 1900s. The Mayor was entertaining President Taft and asked his butler to "dress up" their popular but bland crab bisque for the occasion. He added some red crab roe for color and extra flavor, a little Worcestershire sauce and a healthy splash of sherry. Crab roe is hard to come by now, so in practice, most she-crab soup is actually a rich and creamy crab bisque flavored with sherry and sometimes colored by egg yolk. We make the real thing with backfin crabmeat, crab roe and kelp (to replace MSG and boost and harmonize flavors. See "The Magic of Umami" Published in Pleasant Living magazine January/February 2006. The article can also be found on our web page: