



Crabs

Just above the Gulf of Mexico's coastline, Louisiana's hundreds of streams and inlets play host to a creature officially called the Atlantic Blue Crab. Scientifically speaking it's the species *Callinectes sapidus*, which translates as "beautiful, savory swimmer." It's the same crab found along the Atlantic coast, most notably in the Chesapeake Bay near Baltimore.

The most familiar American crab preparation, aside from steaming or boiling, is probably the crab cake. In New Orleans, the number of crab dishes is limited only by the imagination of the cook. Those with hard shells might be boiled in spices and seasonings, or their meat found in a stuffing combined with breadcrumbs, or baked in a cream sauce au gratin, or flavoring any number of gumbos.

The soft-shell kind are usually dusted with flour and sautéed in butter or fried in oil, sometimes to become the filling of a poor boy sandwich.

TYPES OF CRABMEAT AND CRABS

Jumbo lump crabmeat. These especially large nuggets of white meat from boiled hard-shell crabs are the choicest morsels. They have an especially rich, delicious flavor and usually cost about twice as much as other crabmeat. Jumbo lumps are found at the ends of a large crab's two "swimmer fins" when the fins are pulled from the shell. The lumps can be as large as $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in diameter, and should contain very few, if any, shell pieces.

Lump crabmeat. These pieces of white crab lumps are smaller than the jumbo. They also should be free of shell pieces. The essential difference between the two is the size of the lumps.

Crab claw meat. The attraction of claw meat is its distinctive sweetness. Its somewhat sponge-like texture and partly brown color are what distinguishes it from lump crabmeat. It is often used to flavor stuffings, gumbos and stews.

Crab fingers. Popular as snacks, these are crab claws cracked to expose the darker meat just below the pincers. After cooking, they are often marinated in spicy vinaigrettes or floured and fried, and are eaten with the fingers.

Soft-shell crabs. A crab grows by moulting; that is, by shedding its hard-shell (or exoskeleton) over time and growing a new one. During the moulting process, when the shells are soft and paper-thin, the entire crab, including its shell, is edible once it is properly cleaned (see the instructions for doing this on page 32). In south Louisiana, soft-shell crabs are usually fried, sautéed or broiled. They are known in some parts of the United States as "peelers" or "shedders."

Buster crabs. Fishers will occasionally catch especially small blue crabs that are just ready to moult. The smaller the crab the thinner the shell and the higher the meat content. The smallest ones are called “buster crabs,” or “busters,” and they are a great delicacy among crab lovers for their high meat content. Like other soft-shells, they are cooked whole (after cleaning), usually by frying, sautéing or broiling.

Gumbo crabs. These are hard-shell crabs that are too scrawny to yield good lump crabmeat and are used to provide crab flavor to gumbos, stocks and other preparations.

DETERMINING FRESHNESS AND QUALITY

Whole hard-shell crabs are sold either live or cooked. Whole soft-shell crabs are usually sold raw and cleaned. The best measure of freshness for store-bought crabs and crabmeat is their smell. The fresh ones carry a clean, rather astringent smell, with no unpleasant “fishy” odors. If crabmeat is sold in a covered container, open it and smell the contents before buying.

Finding spoiled crabs or crabmeat in a reputable seafood market is rare. Dependable dealers make certain their seafood is checked regularly and stored properly.

STORING CRABS

Once store-bought crabs or crabmeat are at home, store them in the coldest spot in your refrigerator and use a thermometer to keep the temperature set below 40°F. (Keeping them in ice, as restaurants do, is ideal but may not be practical for the home kitchen.)

It is best to use them one or two days, at the latest, after they were bought, since you don’t know how long they were in the store or market.

Hard-shell Atlantic crabs will stay alive for three to four days if they’re kept cold and damp, ideally in a mesh bag in the bottom of the refrigerator covered with a damp cloth. They do need regular checking. (Live crabs should not be iced.) Do not seal live crabs in an airtight container. They will not be able to breathe and will die.

The recommended method for boiling and opening hard-shell crabs is illustrated on the following page. ☞



Preparing Crabs For Use In Recipes

BOILING HARD-SHELL CRABS

Before the meat is removed from hard-shell crabs, they need to be cooked while live. The following is a recipe for boiling one dozen crabs, or four servings.

Note: Soft-shell crabs should never be boiled.

1. If the live crabs have any dirt or debris on them, rinse them off in a large sink or outside with a water hose.
2. Pour 3 quarts water into an 8-quart stockpot or 8-quart Dutch oven.
3. Add 1 bag Zatarain's Crab Boil seasonings, a half bulb of garlic cut to expose all the cloves and one lemon, quartered.
4. Add ¼ cup kosher salt.
5. Bring the water to a boil.
6. Reduce the heat and simmer, uncovered, for 10 minutes.
7. Add the 12 live crabs one at a time, holding them carefully with tongs to avoid being pinched, and immediately cover the pot.
8. Let the liquid return to a simmer. When the simmer point is reached, turn off the heat and allow the crabs to steep, uncovered, for 10 minutes.
9. Remove the crabs from the pot with a large strainer and allow them to cool for a few minutes.

OPENING HARD-SHELL CRABS AND REMOVING THEIR MEAT

After the boiled crabs are cool enough to handle, they can be opened so their meat can be removed. Among the handy tools for doing this are a small hammer or sturdy knife to crack the claws and nutcrackers, lobster crackers, lobster picks, snail forks, cocktail forks and shellfish picks.



1. Turn the crab to expose its underside. At the center of the bottom shell you'll see a small, tab-like, pointed flap. With your fingernail or a knife point, pull up the pointed tab, which is part of the flat, curved shell known the "apron." Pull the apron back and, with kitchen shears or a knife, cut it off and discard it.



2. Turn the crab over to remove its large top shell. Hold the base of the crab within one hand and, with the thumb of the other hand, pull the upper shell away from the body.



3. With the top shell removed, you'll see two rows of grayish, sponge-like gills at each side of the body. Remove them with a knife or your fingers and discard them. You'll also see little yellow-orange lumps in the cavity at the center of the body. This is the crab fat, which may be discarded or used to flavor a sauce or a crab butter.



4. Twist off the claws and legs. Crack open the claw shells with a nutcracker or by striking them with a heavy knife or a small hammer. Pick out the claw meat with one or more of the tools mentioned in the headnote on the opposite page.



5. With a large knife cut the body in half at the middle and then, if desired, into quarters. Or simply snap the body in half. Pick out the lumps of white meat, again within one or more of the tools mentioned in the headnote on the previous page.

REMOVING SHELL PIECES FROM CRABMEAT

Once the meat is removed from a crab shell, any small remaining shell pieces need to be removed. This is the most efficient way to do it:

1. Pour cool water in a small bowl and place it near where you'll be working.
2. Scatter the crabmeat out on a plate and search for small pieces of shell by gently picking through the meat.
3. After removing a shell piece dip your fingers in the bowl of cool water, which will help remove the shell from your fingers.

PREPARING SOFT-SHELL CRABS FOR COOKING

Cleaning a soft-shell crab is a simple process that can be completed in about a minute. It involves the removal of the underside “apron,” the gills and the “face”—the eyes and mouth.



1. Turn the crab to expose its underside. At the center of the bottom shell you'll see a small, tab-like, pointed flap. With your fingernail or a knife point, pull up the pointed tab, which is part of the flat, curved shell known the “apron.” Pull the apron back and, with kitchen shears or a knife, cut it off and discard it.



2. Turn the crab over to expose its soft top shell. Without separating the top shell from the crab's body, gently pull up one sharply pointed end of the shell. Beneath it you'll see a row of grayish, sponge-like gills. Remove the gills with a knife or shears. Do the same with the gills beneath the other pointed end of the top shell. Discard the gills.





3. With a pair of kitchen shears, remove and discard the crab's "face"—the eyes and mouth at the front edge of the shell. The cut should be about a half-inch behind the eyes and mouth. Directly behind the cut you made there may be a small, water-filled sac. If there is, it needs to be emptied, so squeeze out the contents.



4. This photo of a cleaned soft-shell crab shows the parts that have been removed. Left to right, they are: the face, the gills and the apron. **S**

