The Fun Of Getting The Blues

By Jim Bradshaw
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Traveling along any highway in coastal Louisiana, you are almost certain to be accompanied by a drainage channel, canal or bayou on one side of the road or the other. These will often border both sides of the roadway. From time-to-time, creosote-timbered bridges and walkways span these little waterways, opening the way to two-rutted trails winding back into the marsh.

If you stop and examine these bridges, you will find hundreds of pieces of twine tied to them, apparently the remnants of some giant spider's web. You'll notice the same thing as you walk out onto the piers and wharves pushing into our lakes and bays. If a man did a study on it, he could probably tell you how old these wharves and bridges are by the string-remnant count.

The string is there because blue crabs are in these waters, and of all the things overwhelming nature's cornucopia in Acadiaiana, there may be nothing more delectable.

Commercial fishermen catch millions of pounds of blue crab here each year, and ship them across the nation. In fact, Louisiana now produces more than half of the Gulf region's annual blue crab harvest and accounts for 15 to 25 percent of the nation's annual domestic supply.

But local folks catch their own as often as they buy them. It's cheaper that way, and as easy as one-two-three. On any summer weekend, cars and pickup trucks will line the roadways near the little bridges. The whole family will be there: Momma in a folding chair, directing operations from beneath a big straw sunhat; Pop going from line to line with a dip net in his hand; the kids, still damp from "accidentally" falling into the water, following close on Pop's heels to pull the lines in.

It's a fun family outing, and a preparation for a feast. Crabbing is best here from June to September, when the blues migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the shallow coastal waters. Dozens of other crab species come with them, but only the blue crab, Callinectes sapidus, is commercially important and easily caught. These crabs live in coastal, saltwater bays and estuaries of the Gulf.

You can catch them plenty of ways. Bait is no problem, they will eat anything resembling meat. Fish heads, chicken or turkey necks will do just fine.

The simplest way to catch is to throw the bait up on a 10- to 12-inch cord long enough to reach the bottom, and plop it into the water. That's all there is to it. In this way, you will have to crawl off with it, stretching the line tight. When that happens, you just pull him up gently, scoop him from the water with your dipnet, and drop him into an ice chest or hamper.

Drop nets are another favorite way for family crabbing. Round, wire-rimmed nets are cheap and plentiful at bait stands throughout Acadiaiana. A half-dozen nets, some twine and some bait is all you will need. Just tie the bait to the net and lower it into the water. The net lies flat on the bottom, and crabs crawl onto it. When you pull the net from the water, draw strings shape it into a basket. The crabs are trapped.

Before long, the kids will have given up line-pulling and will be gathered around the hamper, poking with sticks at the crabs, trying to make them latch onto their line. Soft shells don't feed during their vulnerable growing period, so you probably won't catch one on your handline or your net.

When it comes to eating crabs, there aren't many better ways than the traditional Louisiana crab boil. The live crabs are placed in boiling water laden with spicy seasonings, salt and lemons. When the crabs have thoroughly boiled, they are pulled from the pot and set to cool. Then it's time to reap the rewards of the day's work.

The crab shells are cracked open and the white meat plucked by hand. Some people prefer to save the crab meat for other recipes - you'll have to look long and hard for something better than a cold crab meat salad on a hot summer day - or to use as stuffing for fish, in a casserole, or in the dozens of other ways Cajun cooks have learned to fix them over the years.

Here's some ways you might try:

MARIINATED CRAB CLAWS:
To make the marinade, combine a small package of dry Italian salad dressing with three-fourths cup of olive oil and one-fourth cup of champagne vinegar. Add to this one-half teaspoon of oregano, one tablespoon of lemon juice, and one-half teaspoon of finely minced garlic, one-quarter cup of dried parsley flakes, one-fourth teaspoon of salt, one-half teaspoon of freshly ground pepper, one-quarter cup of grated Parmesan cheese, one tablespoon of white wine, and one tablespoon of Worcestershire sauce.

Place one pound of fresh crab claws in a heavy plastic bag with the marinade, leaving enough room for the ingredients to mix well together. Place the bag in a refrigerator and refrigerate all day, turning the bag several times. Serve the claws with a little of the sauce poured over them.

CRAB MEAT AU GRATIN:
First prepare a white sauce. Melt one-fourth cup of butter in a heavy saucepan over low heat. Blend in one-fourth cup of flour, stirring constantly until smooth. Remove the sauce from the heat and stir in one cup of scalded milk, a bit at a time. Season with salt and pepper to taste and cook the sauce on low heat until it is thick and bubbly.

To prepare the crab meat, saute one-half cup of chopped green onions, two tablespoons of chopped celery and one-half cup of chopped mushrooms in three tablespoons of butter. Add the white sauce, one pound of lump crab meat, and salt and pepper to taste.

Place these in a buttered baking dish, top with a cup of grated American cheese, and bake at 350 degrees until brown (about 20 minutes). Garnish with black olives and wedges of lemon.

CRAB ETROUTE:
Brown one-fourth cup of flour in one cup of oil. Add two medium onions, chopped fine; one finely chopped bell pepper; and three

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fourths cup of chopped celery.
Cook until the vegetables are wilted.

Add two pounds of crab meat, one-fourth cup of green onion tops, chopped parsley, and one-fourth cup of water.
Salt and pepper to taste, then bring to a boil in an uncovered pot on medium heat for about 15 minutes.

Serve over cooked rice.

CRAB MEAT IMPERIAL:
Combine one finely chopped bell pepper and two finely chopped pimientos.
Add one tablespoon of mustard, one teaspoon of salt, one-half teaspoon of white pepper, two beaten eggs, and a cup of mayonnaise.
Mix well, then gently fold in three pounds of lump crab meat.
Divide the mixture into eight crab shells or ramekins, heaping slightly.

Dot with mayonnaise, sprinkle with paprika, and bake, uncovered, at 350 degrees for 15 minutes.