The misunderstood mudbug

Just because a crawfish has a straight tail doesn't mean it was dead before cooking, experts say.

A recent release from the Louisiana State University AgCenter hopes to dispel a few long-held crawfish myths.

But for those who have heard “Don’t eat the dead ones!” for years, the meat from a straight-tailed crawfish might be hard to swallow.

That’s right. Coming across a straight-tailed mudbug in a batch of boiled crawfish does not mean the critter was dead before being cooked.

“What we found was that dead crawfish can have tightly curled tails. And we also found that live crawfish under certain circumstances could have straight tails,” said Ray McClain, a professor of aquaculture for the LSU AgCenter.

The research is not new. It was published by the LSU AgCenter in 2009 after a controlled study was done.

By Megan Wyatt
mbwyatt@theadvertiser.com

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Crawfish

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The researchers determined that too many crawfish in the same pot can cause straight tails because a tail might get caught on another crawfish, keeping it straight instead of allowing it to curl. A cold crawfish could be another reason for a straight tail.

The LSU AgCenter recently paired this information with new research done at the center that dispels another long-held crawfish myth that using salt in water to clean crawfish before boiling purges them of mud, debris and waste from the intestinal tract.

"There's a lot of anecdotal evidence that the saltwater purge didn't work, but we didn't have hard data at the time," McClain said. "We're not surprised with the outcome, but now, we did a study and got some good, hard data."

The best method to purge crawfish from mud, debris and waste from the crustacean's intestinal tract, is through freshwater filtration systems. Removing all waste from a crawfish's intestinal tract can take between 12 and 24 hours. This is not practical for homeowners and is only sometimes practical for business owners, McClain said.

Anthony Arceneaux, who owns Hawk's Restaurant in Rayne, is one of the few in Acadiana who fully purges crawfish before boiling them.

"I lose probably about 10 percent of the crawfish from it," Arceneaux said. "We only serve clean, purged crawfish. A lot of times, people add a lot of seasoning and stuff to cover up the taste. We don't use as much seasoning because we don't need it."

The purging process involves withholding food from live crawfish while they are cleaned for about 24 hours through a 20,000-gallon freshwater tank.

Arceneaux has to clean his tanks twice per week to collect 6 to 8 inches in sediment from the bottom, he said.

"That's from the debris that comes out of the crawfish," said Arceneaux. "If you'd see it, you'd never eat another unpurged crawfish again."

Randol's Seafood Restaurant owner Frank Randol does not purge crawfish of intestinal material but uses an hour-long freshwater process to clean the crawfish of mud and other particles.

Both Arceneaux and Randol said they remove straight-tailed crawfish from orders of crawfish before serving them because most people still believe the old wives' tale.

"Are they dead? No," Randol said. "The bottom line is we still have to deal with the public perception, so we just take them out."

Johnny Hebert, who owns CrawfishTown U.S.A. in Breaux Bridge, leaves the straight-tailed crawfish on the serving platters, however, because there is nothing wrong with them.

He does not fully purge his crawfish but uses a system that is similar to the one used at Randol's.

"If a crawfish is boiled right and peeled right, the vein comes out easily," Hebert said. "If it doesn't come out on the first peel, most people will take it out themselves."

Generally, straight-tailed crawfish and crawfish that have not had the vein removed are safe to eat.

"There's very little danger of eating cooked crawfish because any parasite or organism is going to be dead if cooked properly," McClain said. "However, the vein is just not very appetizing to most people, and that's fairly easy to pick out after peeling the crawfish."