

Picking the Blues

By Julie Osteen Seckinger

The Medway River forms the western border of the South Bryan County peninsula. Recently, people have been crossing the river in boatloads, headed for the historic fishing village of Sunbury—or to be more specific, for the Sunbury Crab Company restaurant. Why? The freshest and best blue crabs around.

Last fall, friends and neighbors started inviting us for Sunday afternoon boat trips to the Sunbury Crab Company. I was busy working on the premier issue of the magazine and was never free to join them, which didn't bother me. Why would any true coastal person order blue crabs in a restaurant? It's just not done. Everyone knows that you must catch and cook them yourself for the best flavor and that they are much too messy to eat in a restaurant. And why in the world would anyone actually pay market price for blue crabs? They are free in our own backyard, for goodness' sake. Secretly, I sneered at my friends.

Then one day, they brought back some take-out for me. Good grief, they just didn't get it; the only thing worse than restaurant crabs is dried-up take-out. But having suffered from the lack of crabs during the drought, my cravings got the best of me and I tried them. They were as good as any I had ever eaten. So I agreed to cross the river.

I was taken with the place immediately. The multi-level, open-air restaurant flows easily from outdoors to in and offers magnificent views from seemingly every spot. With palm trees

growing through the tin roof, it has a wonderful coastal flavor without being kitschy. It is definitely the type of place you go to as much for the experience as the meal. The ambiance and food are in perfect balance.

I convinced the Maleys, owners of the family-run restaurant, to let me tag along for a day to learn their secrets and story. The first thing I learned was that Clay, the youngest of the three sons, catches fresh crabs for the restaurant daily – even for the crab cakes and stew. So I met Clay early one morning and we set out on the river to pull the crab traps.

“We’ve lived in Sunbury for over 20 years,” Clay told me as we pulled away from the dock, “basically all of my



Clay Maley leaving the Sunbury Crab Company, sorting the blue crab catch (left inset), Sponge stone crab (right inset)



(above & right) Joe & Clay demonstrate how to pick the crabs.

life. Growing up here there were no neighborhood kids to play with, but my backyard had no boundaries. My brother Joe and I would take our 13-foot Whaler out exploring all day. My parents had a horn made out of a conch shell. They would blow it and we knew to come home.

“As they got older, Joe and Amos, my oldest brother, found other hobbies they were interested in and good at, but I was always a river rat. I would throw a cast net and catch some shrimp, then take



the shrimp and catch some fish, then use some fish to catch crabs. I could be entertained catching fiddler crabs in the marsh for hours. I always found something outdoors that interested and fascinated me. I still do.”

Clay explained that the family has cooked for years in their home, catering for and entertaining military and government officials and businesses that were looking for a secluded and private place to meet. When the family decided to open the restaurant a little over two years ago, they started perfecting the process. Although each has a regular responsibility – Clay crabs; Joe cooks with Amos’ help when he’s home from law school; Elaine, the mother, handles the business side and front side of the restaurant; and Barney, the father, is the overall architect, builder, manager and driving force behind the operation – they are completely cross-trained, and each gives input on all aspects. Their top priority was to provide the highest quality product at the lowest price. That meant catching fresh crabs themselves each day.

As we pulled the first trap, baited with threadfin herring, Clay explained the process. They have a total of 80 traps, but pull only about 50 a day, rotating sites. The restaurant requires about 100 pounds of picked crab meat and 300 pounds of steamed crabs per week. They are careful to take no more than that and only keep the large, full males – the Jimmies.

Clay sorted the crabs in seconds, flicking the keepers in the crab basket and the others over the side. “You can tell if they are full by the weight and if there is some muscle behind their pinch,” he explained. “Sometimes the large dark ones that people think are old crabs

filled with meat have been burrowed in the marsh and never made it out to the deeper water to mature. They are actually pretty empty.”

We moved from trap to trap, with Clay pointing out various sights and providing tips along the way – like the fact that crabs that mature in the creeks have a different taste than ones matured in deeper waters. Like wine, the taste is affected by their nutrients. This makes me rethink my usual rotten chicken approach to catching crabs. Clay confirmed that rotten chicken does attract more crabs, but the crabs can take on that flavor. Tasty thought.

As we head up one of Ossabaw Island’s creeks checking stone crab traps, Clay looks up to an osprey nest. “Every day it’s the same routine,” Clay described. “The osprey comes out to see what I’m up to.” I wondered if it ever gets old, day after day pulling trap after trap, or if nature’s wonders begin to lose their awe factor after a while.

“Never,” Clay assured me. “I’m constantly looking around, seeing something new every day – I could never tire of the beauty. I love crawling around in the marsh, winding around the creeks pulling critters out of the water. And there are a lot of other things I want to work on.” On the return voyage, he showed me one of their new projects – an oyster bed where they are experimenting with cultivating and harvesting oysters.

Joe met us back at the restaurant with our catch. I was eager to learn their cooking secrets and looked on anxiously as they took the crabs to the processing room (which had an incredible view itself – these people know how to capture a landscape). They deftly and quickly started the assembly line. Joe took each live crab, flipped it on its back, and cut it in half with a cleaver (Ouch! I don’t think I’ll be doing this at home).



Clay backed and cleaned the crabs and placed them in a steaming pan. The crabs must then be cooked within 15 minutes or they go bad. The Maleys cook and pick about 100 pounds a week to use in their recipes. The steamed crabs are cleaned and cooked upon order. “We steam the crabs, not boil,” Joe said. “They are juicier and have more flavor. Also, the longer the crabs are out of the water, the more juices they lose. That is why

it is important for us to catch and cook them fresh daily.”

We moved to the kitchen, where the crabs were steamed for four to five minutes with a little seasoning from Maryland. When cooking a larger batch, they steam for six to seven minutes. “It is important not to overcook the crabs,” Joe directed. “Steam only until there is no blue or green coloring left and the meat is firm. The texture is as important as the flavor. If you cook too long, the meat will be tough and stick to the shell. If you undercook, it will be too soft and mushy.”

Then Joe and Clay taught me how to pick the blues. This is important because it takes about two dozen crabs to produce about a pound of meat; if you aren’t quick, you’ll starve. First, carefully break off the legs without pulling out any meat. With a mallet, crack the large claw and remove the dark, juicy claw meat. With fingers on one side and thumb on the other, squeeze the body to break in half. Gently pull apart the halves and the prized, rich, salty-sweet lump meat appears, ready to be devoured.

“We tried different things before settling on this method to come up with the best presentation and flavor,” Joe explained. There were two types of people they had to consider in doing so, Clay said. “There’s the local who says ‘Hell, I can do this at home. I’m not ordering crabs in a restau-

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rant.’ And then there’s the novice who has never seen or eaten a blue crab, much less picked one. We had to appeal to both.”

Joe added, “We have a lot of people come in here who are skeptical or don’t know what to expect. They are used to king crab and wonder why we don’t serve that. We don’t want to serve king crab; that’s not who we are. This is the Georgia coast. Once we show them how easy it is and they taste the blue crabs, they are sold. They usually come back again and again and bring their skeptical friends with them. But I think it is the whole atmosphere that brings people back, not just the food. They come in groups, many by boat, to enjoy the view and good food with their friends.”

Sunbury Crab Company offers a full seafood menu in addition to blue crabs. For directions or information, call 912.884.8640. 🌞



The various shells caught in the traps are sold for shell paving.