

# crazy FOR crab

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW  
TO ENJOY FABULOUS CRAB AT HOME

FRED THOMPSON



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# Dedication

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*For Lil'Bit, you make me proud*

# Acknowledgments

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Before I can thank anyone for the help and inspiration I was given on this book, a huge heartfelt thank you must go to all the men, women, and children who fish the waters of this great country and provide us not only with crabs, but with all the other tasty wonders of the water. It's hard and thankless work, and the people who do it, do it out of pure love of their community, their heritage, and nature. We all need to take a moment and remember these people who hold the keys to the wealth of the feast we put on our tables.

If ever an editor was inspired by a meal, it was Pam Hoenig and her delight over a freshly steamed crab. She was beside me and behind me every step of the way in creating this book. My agent Lisa Ekus, helped make this book a reality. I'll be forever indebted to a dapper Southern lawyer from Hickory, North Carolina, Young Smith, who 5 years ago put in my hands William Warner's Pulitzer Prize—winning book *Beautiful Swimmers*, and set me on the right path.

So many people in the food world and coastal communities of this land have been kind and giving of their time: Beth Thomas, educational coordinator at the University of South Carolina's Baruch Marine Field Biology Laboratory at Hobcaw Barony, just north of Georgetown, South Carolina, who impressed upon me the absolute necessity of maintaining our saltwater estuaries if we wanted to keep eating seafood; the folks at the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in St. Michaels, Maryland, who pointed me in so many great directions while I was on the Chesapeake Bay; the good people of Crisfield, Maryland, self-proclaimed Crab Capital of the World, who took me in as one of their own; the Crisfield Chamber of Commerce, for some award-winning Crab Derby Days recipes; Heidi Cusick, with the Mendocino (California) County Alliance, who gave so much of herself and her time and introduced me to Dungeness crab country. How can I forget Gene Mattiuzzo, who led me through the processing of Dungeness crab and regaled me with stories about crabbing on the north coast, keeping me laughing the whole time (and not many book interviews end with a toast of 40-year-old moonshine). Thanks to Linda Johnson, who ate all my leftovers and picked crabs when I got tired; Diane Collins, my physical therapist in New York, who became a gung ho crab recipe taster; B. A. and Sam Schlegel, who were a wealth of knowledge not only about the Florida crab business, but also about the Chesapeake Bay; and Pableaux Johnson, who always seemed to know when to call from his Louisiana home and give me a kick in the butt. A special thanks to Jordy Rosenhek, manager of Wild Edibles at Grand Central Terminal in New York City. His help and patience were beyond the call. And a big thank-you to all the chefs and home cooks whose recipes you'll find between these covers.

Without the great folks at The Harvard Common Press none of this could ever have been possible. They are such wonderful people to be partnered with in a project like this. And thank you to Brian Hagiwara for the wonderful photographs and to Barbara Balch, who shaped the vision of this book.

I'd be remiss not to mention Toni Allegro, a great person, a great teacher, and a great inspiration. Without her positive attitude, I doubt I would ever have written a thing.

# Introduction

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Crabmeat got me into trouble as a child. I was about 10 years old when I discovered the magical essence of crab. The problem came as I ate more than my share of crab claws at a cocktail party in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I was like a buzzard, swooping down on the bowl of claws and hightailing it like crazy. I couldn't help myself; those claws were just too good. I risked punishment and banishment with each raid, as my embarrassed father railed at me to stay away from the food. Finally, my parents' good friend Blanche Brown, the hostess, came to my rescue and sat me down in the kitchen with my own personal bowl of claws. So started a 30-plus-year love of the most cantankerous beast in the sea.

There's a saying about blue crabs that I suspect applies to the entire species: "Put one crab in a bushel basket, and it will find a way to climb out. Put two in a basket, and they'll fight each other so that neither will escape." Crabs love to fight—with each other and with us. The task of getting that luscious crab to the table can be difficult, but the end result is always well worth the effort.

Crabs have been very regional in nature until the past few years. Improved transportation has given seafood wholesalers the ability to make crabmeat—and different crab types—available on a more widespread basis, challenging some regional preferences along the way. The blue crab's primary domain has long been considered the Chesapeake Bay. Folks along the eastern and western shores of the bay will quickly tell you that the Chesapeake blue crab and the methods they use to prepare the beast are superior to any other. The blue crab does exist elsewhere, though, in the sounds and bays along the Atlantic coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. People in these areas are just as proud of their crabs and the recipes that they have applied to them for decades. From the north coast of California to the cold waters of Alaska, another, larger crustacean holds court: the Dungeness crab. Sweeter, denser and more meat with less trouble are the battle cries of the Dungeness troops. And what of King crabs and Jonahs, snow crabs, and the newly named peekytoe crab, which is really a rock or sand crab? The fine taste also demands respect.

I should confess that I grew up on the East Coast, a few hours west of the blue crab—rich estuaries of North Carolina. For more than half my life, the only "fitting" crabmeat came from a blue crab. The imported canned Dungeness crab that was available was poorly packed and contained more water than crab. Over time, I journeyed to the crab meccas of the East Coast: Faidley's in Baltimore's Lexington Market; the Crab Claw Restaurant in St. Michaels, Maryland; crab feasts in Crab City, aka Annapolis, Maryland; the National Hard Crab Derby & Fair in Crisfield, Maryland, the self-proclaimed Crab Capital of the World; Urbanna, Virginia, home to some of the best soft-shell crabs in the Chesapeake Bay; and the crabbers' enclave on King Street in Hampton, Virginia. I thought I knew crabs.

Then 2 years ago, I hunkered down on one of the stools at Swan Oyster Depot in San Francisco and was treated to not only divine Dungeness crab Louis but also to an education on West Coast crab. Maybe all this crab business deserved another look.

"Follow the water," veteran crabbers say. A simple thought, easily spoken. Yet for a waterman of the Chesapeake Bay, a crabber in the sounds of North Carolina or the Pacific Northwest, or anyone who brings the treasures of crab to our tables, this is the gospel, verse, and truth. When William W. Warner first published his Pulitzer Prize—winning book *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs and the Chesapeake Bay* in 1976, he opened the door to a region and an industry largely unknown to most Americans. Although his book focused on the Chesapeake Bay, he indirectly paid tribute to all those people, from all areas of the country, who heroically provide crab and fish for our culinary pleasure.



Pat Whewell, a trotliner out of Tongers Basin on Tilghman Island in the Chesapeake Bay, has been crabbing for 20-plus years. He's up at 3:00 A.M. and on the water by 3:30. His day on the bay ends by early afternoon, his catch sold. Then he returns to Tongers Basin to prepare his boat for the next day. If time permits and the day has been successful, he might drink "coffee" (think alcoholic beverage) with other watermen at the small general store. He wonders about his future and the future of blue crabs in the Bay. He's not alone.

Wayne Bridges, manager of the exceptional Crab Claw Restaurant and a lifetime resident of the area, is concerned that the crab might go the way of the oyster, once the biggest source of income on the bay. Rockfish, which are prevalent in the bay, have been protected and now gorge themselves with young crabs at an alarming rate. Is there a balance?

Three thousand miles away, just outside Fort Bragg, California, Frank Bertoni could not be any more different from Pat Whewell, yet both are very much of the same mind. Bertoni crabs with specially designed pots he makes himself. He has been crabbing for almost 50 years, but he would consider only 5 of those years great. Bertoni looks at the ocean as a bank: "You take just what you need and return what you don't. If you fish like that, the ocean will look out for you." Both Bertoni and Whewell are concerned about government regulations and that seem to them to favor the large outfitters. Bertoni has seen large boats arrive in the San Francisco area with more Dungeness crabs than could be processed, resulting in 5,000 to 6,000 pounds of crabs left to die, wasted.

Crabs are strange creatures. Their habits seem set, then will change completely. Watermen and crabbers are in tune with these changes. They have a sense—stronger than a sixth sense—almost a mystical ability to understand the variances of crabs and the water. Pat Whewell says simply, "You can't fight the water."

Beth Thomas, educational coordinator at the Baruch Marine Field Laboratory, part of the University of South Carolina and located at Hobcaw Barony in Winyah Bay, near Georgetown, South Carolina, has an interesting insight: "If you are a lover of seafood, then remember that you can trace almost every seafood species back to the salt marshes, where they begin life and grow." Although East Coast crabs are being invaded by scrappy species from the waters of China and Japan, their biggest threat is from the "encroaching development in the watersheds." To eat, we must conserve. As you travel the coastal regions of our country, talk with the folks who fill your plate. We sometimes forget where our food was before it hit the supermarket shelf or refrigerator case, and that continued myopia, my friends, will end up hurting us.

In using this cookbook, you will find a mixture of old ways of cooking crab mingled with newfangled flavors and methods. No matter what the crab—Dungeness, blue, king, or Jonah—its flesh beckons you with its singular rich flavor and incomparable texture. Crab is a culinary crown prince that enjoys playing with other flavors, but by itself crab is a feast for the tongue and the soul.

# THE CRAB BASICS

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Crabs have become the national crustacean. Once a regional delicacy, crab is now everywhere: king and snow crab clusters will fill a restaurant in Kansas; Dungeness crab is found in supermarkets on the Eastern Shore of the Delmarva Peninsula, the land of steamed blue crabs; and soft-shell crabs, once limited to the East Coast, have exploded in popularity, with fans as far away as California.

Several species of crab are available in the United States: blue crab, Dungeness crab, Alaskan king crab, snow crab, Jonah crab, rock crab, and stone crab. These are the major players and the ones this book will deal with. They are also the ones most likely to show up in your market. With improved cold storage and overnight air delivery, you may have access to many, if not all, of them. If your choices are more limited, worry not. Crab, in any species, is a sweet, rich taste experience, and it is perfectly permissible to substitute just about any crab for another in most of the recipes in this book.

Let's take a look at these crabs, so that you'll understand some of the crab terminology you will run up against at the grocer, fishmonger, or your local pier.



# Blue Crabs

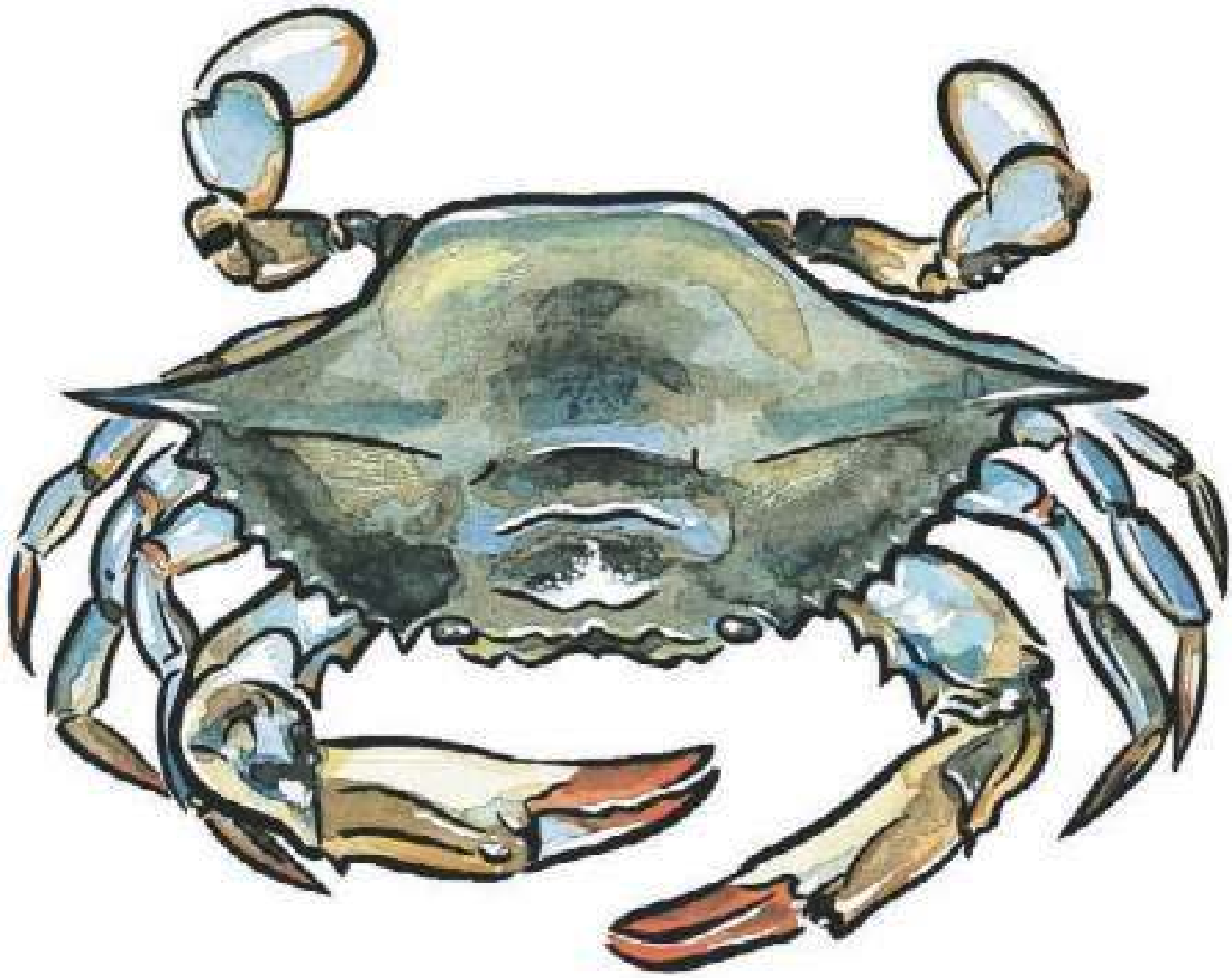
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The beauty of blue crabs is how easy they can be to catch. A stout line, a chicken neck, a homemade net, and you're ready for crabbing. Blue crabs (*Callinectes sapidus*) reside in the waters along the eastern seaboard from Rhode Island to the tip of Florida, around the peninsula, and throughout the Gulf of Mexico. Blue crabs like shallow water and are most abundant in rivers, sounds, and bays. That's why it is so easy to go down to the end of a pier and catch dinner. No boat is required. The watermen of the Chesapeake Bay have a name for those weekend folks and vacationing families who explore the bounty of the water: chicken neckers. If only commercial crabbing were that easy.

Commercial crabbing for blues usually takes one of two forms—crab pots and trotlines. Most of us are familiar with crab pots, which look something like a box of chicken wire with funnels. Crabs are easily enticed into the pots, but getting out is pretty near impossible. Watermen, as they are known in the Chesapeake Bay (crabbers elsewhere), will lay out hundreds of these traps, each attached to a float painted with what appears to be pure whimsy but in reality is the owner's mark, signifying that his pot hangs below. The second type of crabbing is known as trotline crabbing. Trotlines are long lines that are baited at intervals and anchored at both ends. Salted chicken necks or veal or beef lips are popular baits. Each party swears by its particular method. Some crab-eating folks claim that trotline crabs taste better. There is a third method of crabbing, called scraping, which is used when crabs have embedded themselves in the sandy bottom. Scraping relies on a kind of underwater plow with a net to capture the crabs as they pop out of the bottom. Some older watermen and crabbers don't care much for this method, and the debate over its use goes on. However, this method is best for harvesting peelers—crabs that will soon be soft-shell crabs.

Blue crabs account for 50 to 70 percent (depending on whom you ask) of the crab consumed in this country. People in the Chesapeake Bay region claim that half of those crabs come from their waters, but the crab population in the bay has been low for several years. In North Carolina, where most residents believe that the shrimp is king of the seafood business, it is actually the blue crab that leads the pack. North Carolina crabbers now supply many of the picking houses in Maryland and Virginia with crabs. Other important blue crab regions can be found in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, and Texas. Blue crab season runs from about May to October.

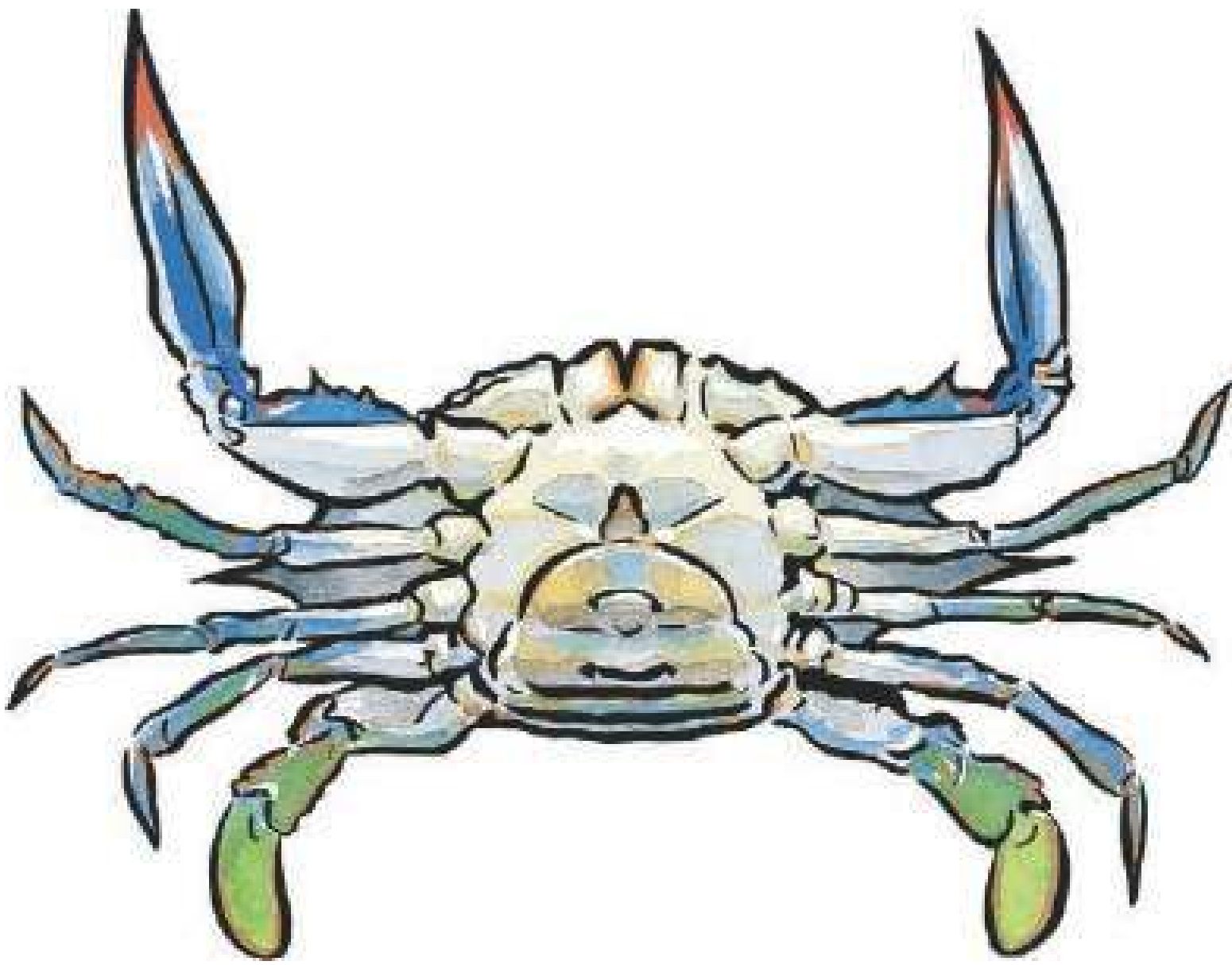
Blue crabs come to market live. Dead crabs have no place in the culinary world. Crabs are mean and feisty, so handle them with care. Use tongs or heavy gloves when dealing with a live blue crab. The best way to judge a live crab is by how active it is. Activity is a good sign of a fresh, good-tasting crab. There are many categories of blue crabs in the commercial crab business—hard, soft, peelers, greens, buckrams, and busters, among others, but you need to be concerned only with sooks, jimmies, and softs.

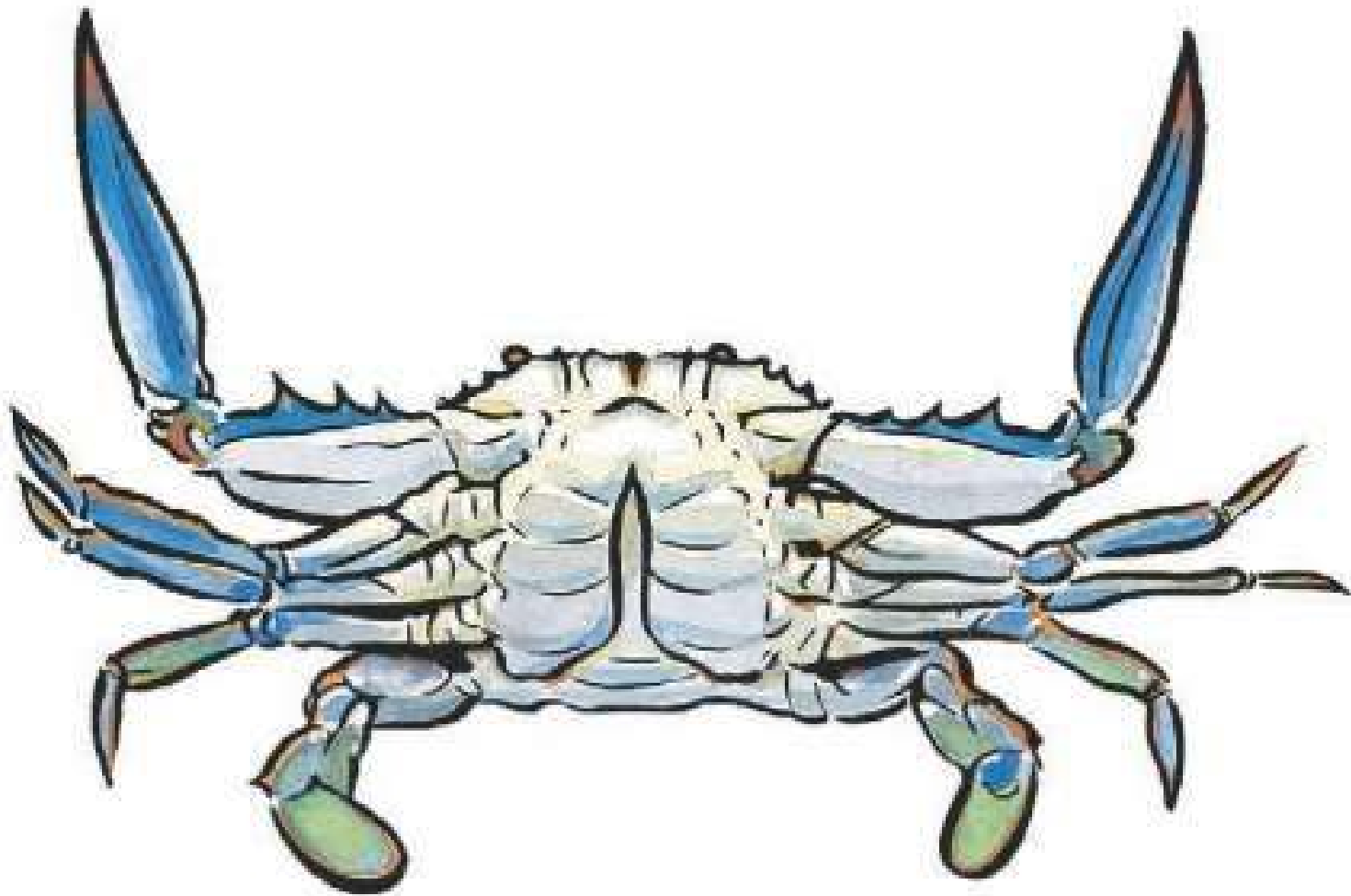


## Sooks and Jimmies

A *sook* is a female blue crab, which is easily identified by the dome-shaped apron resembling the U.S. Capitol on its underbelly. A she-crab is a mature female crab. If a fishmonger tells you that his females are sponge crabs, that means they are carrying egg masses, which is not a bad thing, especially if she-crab soup (see [\[>\]](#) and [\[>\]](#)) is on the menu. Sooks tend to have less meat than male crabs and usually end up in the picking plants for crabmeat.

A *jimmy*, as the name implies, is a male crab. Whereas the female has the Capitol dome as part of its anatomy, a jimmy, not to be outdone, can be spotted by an apron that looks a lot like the Washington Monument. Prized for the amount of meat they can contain, jimmies are the blue crabs of summer. A number one size jimmy (the biggest) is a pure pleasure to eat after it has been perfectly steamed or boiled. Most large jimmies are sold whole, either live or steamed.





## Softs or Soft-Shell Crabs

These are crabs that have molted—broken free from their shells—so that they can continue their growth cycle. They are removed from the water as soon as they molt to prevent any hardening of the shell. Softs are eaten whole—legs, claws, crunchy shells, and all. Soft-shell crabs have become a market phenomenon in recent decades and can now be found throughout the country, at least in restaurants. Beginning in late March, when soft-shell season opens in Florida, the East Coast becomes stupefied with softs. There is intense competition to be the first restaurant in the area with a soft-shell dish on the menu. Up and down the East Coast, soft shells are a welcome sight to those who have longed for them since the end of the previous summer, when fresh soft shells vanish. Soft-shell crab marketing, which is less than 100 years old, has resulted in one of the largest seafood industries in the Chesapeake Bay region.

Softs are sold live, fresh dressed (cleaned), or dressed and frozen. No matter what their form, soft-shell crabs are graded and named according to size. *Mediums* are 2½ to 4 inches, *hotels* are 4 to 4½ inches, *primes* are 4½ to 5 inches, *jumbos* are 5 to 5½ inches, and *whales* are more than 5½ inches. All of these sizes have a place, but when buying softs for home, I like hotels and primes. They are a little sweeter and easier to deal with in home-style cooking.

# Dungeness Crabs

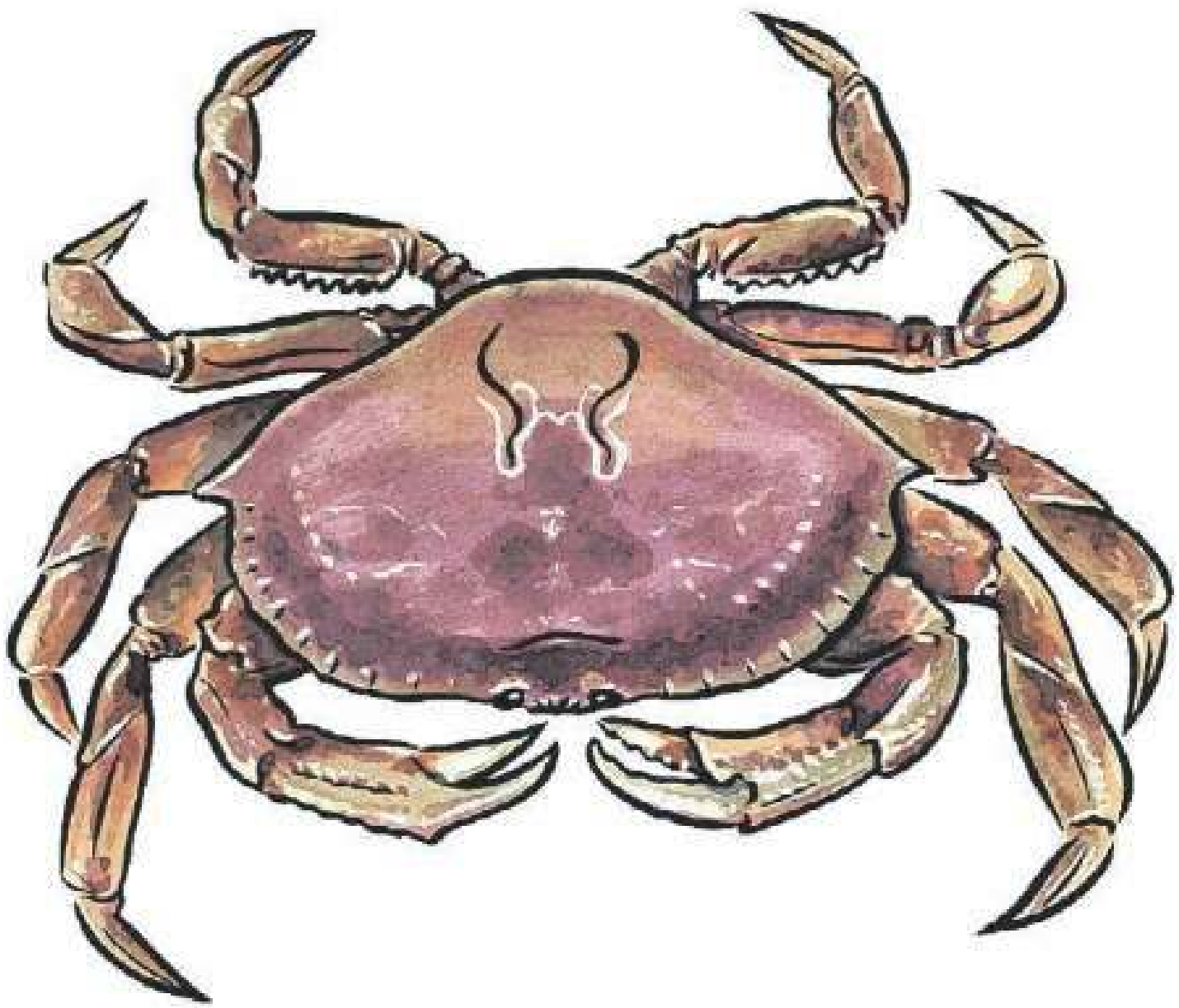
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*Cancer magister*: even in Latin the Dungeness crab makes its importance known. This reddish brown crab is the centerpiece of the West Coast shellfish industry. Dungeness crabs can be found from Santa Barbara, California, to the Pribilof Islands of Alaska. The San Francisco Bay area has a long history of commercially landing Dungeness crabs, but the consensus is that this industry began on the Strait of Juan de Fuca, off the coast of Washington.

Dungeness crab season typically starts in late fall and runs until early spring, but the winter months are most productive. Alaskan Dungeness season runs into the summer, making this crab nearly a year-round treat in the Pacific Northwest. Most Dungeness crab is sold cooked, whole, cracked, portioned, picked, or frozen. Some live Dungeness crabs are available during the crabbing season, especially on the West Coast and in large Asian communities, but by and large, you'll find Dungeness already cooked. Dungeness crab is now available nationally. I bought frozen Dungeness clusters in a supermarket in eastern North Carolina and found them to be of acceptable quality.

Dungeness crabs weigh on average 2 to 3 pounds, with 25 percent of that weight being meat. Only males of a certain size can be taken, and females are left to reproduce. These crabs are caught in circular pots that are much sturdier than those meant for blue crabs. This is because Dungeness crabs prefer deep water and the winter seas can get fairly rough. Although Dungeness crabs do molt, soft-shell Dungeness crabs have not been marketed successfully.





# King Crabs and Snow Crabs

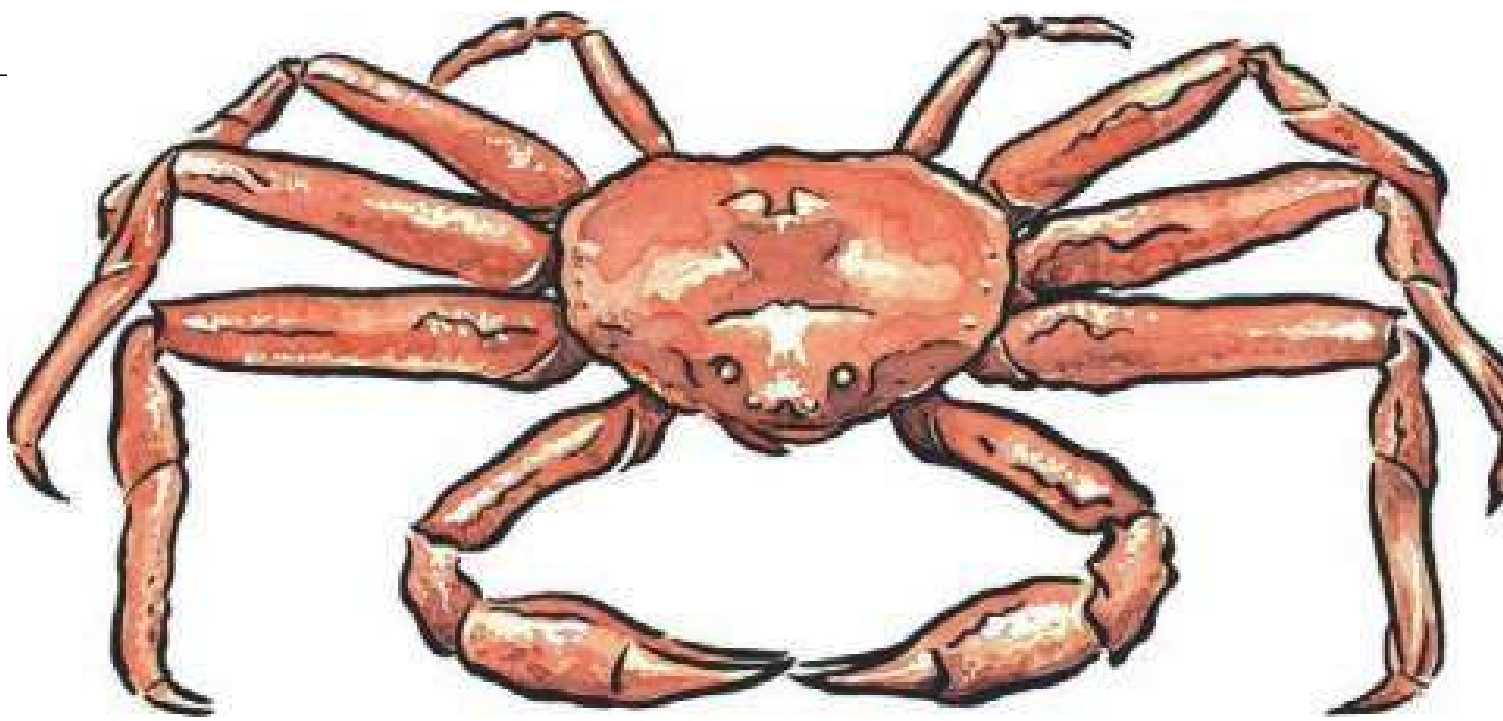
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If you have eaten at a seafood buffet, you are familiar with these two critters. *Alaskan king crab* is a broad term applied to all king crab species. The red king crab (*Paralithodes camtschatica*) is the most common and abundant, but there are also blue (*Paralithodes platypus*) and brown (*Lithodes aequispina*) varieties. As opposed to blue and Dungeness crabs, which have 10 legs, king crabs have 8 legs with 2 claws. They are large, averaging 10 pounds or more.

King crabs are found in the super-cold waters off Alaska at a depth of about one-half mile. King crabs are caught in pots and kept alive in tanks aboard boats that are generally 100 feet or more long. Most of the catch is frozen as legs and claws, making king crab available all year long. The bodies are almost never brought to market, but the backfin meat is canned. I have run across frozen picked king crab on rare occasions, but, frankly, buying it this way takes all the fun out of eating king crabs.

Snow crabs (*Chionoecetes opilio* or *C. bairdi*) are found in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, especially off the coasts of Canada and Alaska. Called opies by fishermen, snow crabs are smaller than kings, and their bodies are covered with dense, fuzzy hair. They average about 5 pounds. Snow crabs get their name from the pristine color of their meat. Virtually all snow crab is shipped frozen. Legs and clusters are the most popular items, but picked snow crab is also available frozen. The Canadian season for snow crabs is April through November. In the Bering Sea, the start of the season depends on when the ice breaks, and the season extends through the summer months.





# Stone Crabs

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Stone crabs (*Menippe mercenaria*) are found mainly along the coast of Florida and as far north as North Carolina. We eat only the claws of the stone crab, and the meat is sweet and dense—in the opinion of some, like lobster. Stone crabs are trapped, with as many as 400 traps on a single line. Only 1 claw is taken from each crab, then the crab is returned to the sea to regenerate another claw. The claw has to be removed with exact precision, and the length of the claw is regulated. Egg-bearing females must be returned to the water intact. Stone crabbing is highly regulated in Florida, where being in possession of a whole stone crab, even a dead one, is illegal. The season for stone crabs is mid-October to mid-May. Stone crab claws are always sold cooked and usually are frozen, making them available year-round. They are great cracked and served chilled (with mustard sauce, of course) or slightly warm. You can pick their meat to use in recipes with exceptional results.

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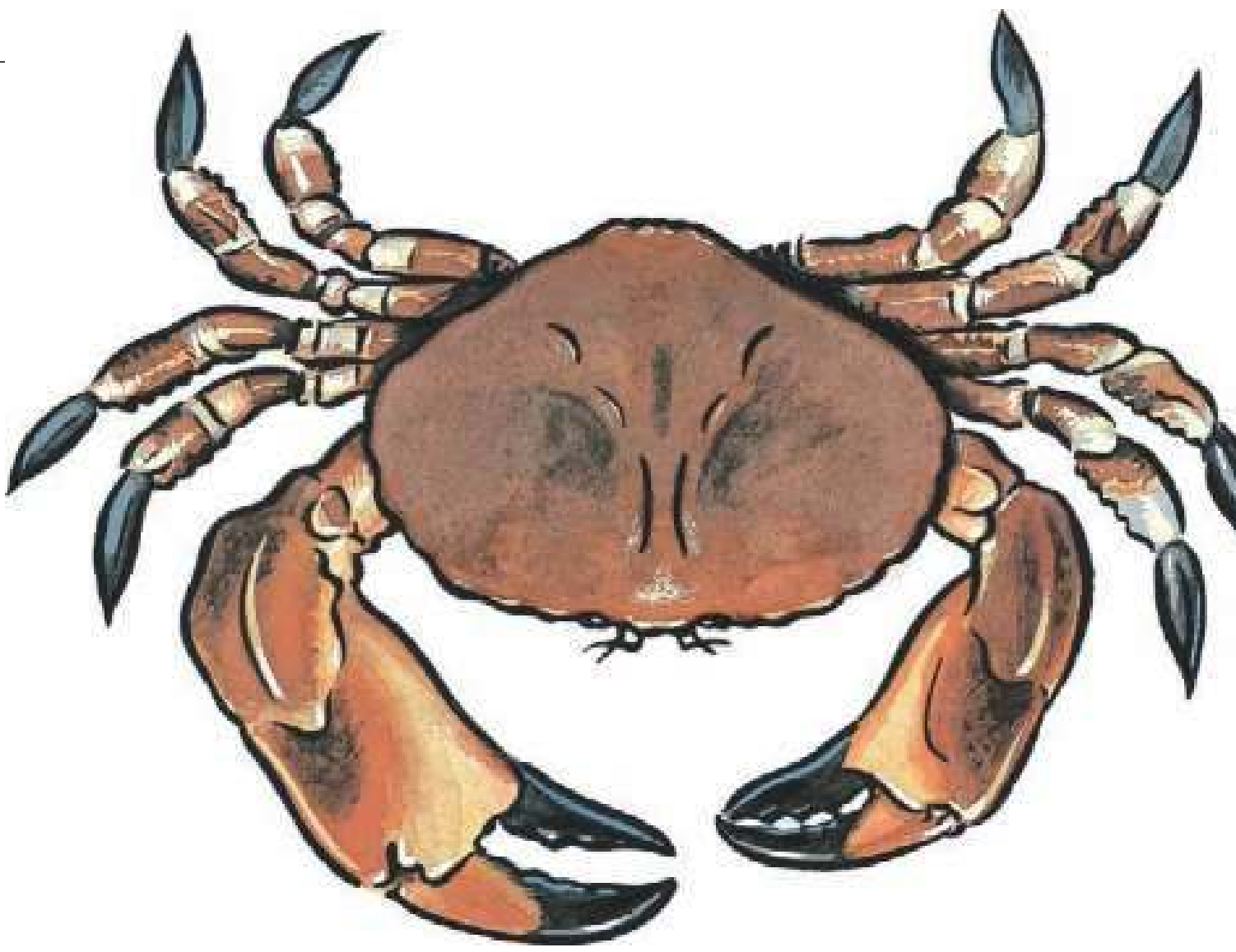
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## A Word about Surimi

This fake crab product, developed in Japan, is cooked white fish that has been flavored, colored, and compressed into chunks. It has its place. After all, what would a California roll be without it? You can use surimi in the salad recipes in this book, but use the real stuff in crab cakes, soups, and casseroles, which just aren't the same prepared with surimi.

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# Maine Crabs

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The Gulf of Maine has long been a shellfish bonanza, but its main product was always lobster. Crabs got in the way, and their availability was a byproduct of lobstering. Not anymore. Twenty years ago, as the demand for crabmeat outstripped the supply, the Jonah crab (*Cancer borealis*) made its debut. deep-water crab, the Jonah is a very close cousin of the Pacific Dungeness crab. It is slightly smaller, but the meat is sweet, though maybe not quite as rich as Dungeness. In cooked dishes, however, it is hard to tell them apart. Jonahs are cheaper than Dungeness crabs, so many East Coast tanks that once were full of Dungeness crabs now hold only Jonahs. Many Chinatown restaurants routinely use Jonah crabs. Live Jonahs are widely available through mail-order sources, and buyers can treat them exactly as they would Dungeness crabs. Picked Jonah crabmeat, usually labeled Maine crabmeat, is becoming much more widespread. Generally, Maine crabmeat is much less expensive than Dungeness and picked blue crab.

In what must be one of the great marketing coups of all time, the lowly rock or sand crab (*Cancer irroratus*) became the peekytoe crab. Peekytoe crabmeat is highly sought after by some of the most famous and discriminating chefs around the world. These crabs are harvested year-round in waters that are 20 to 40 feet deep and weigh only about 1 pound each. They spoil quickly. Their meat is very moist and delicate in texture and fresh in flavor. For the most part, peekytoe crab is used in salads and very simply prepared dishes, so the flavor of the crab stands out. Many restaurants use peekytoe in crab cakes, noting its cheaper-than-blue-crab price and the lovely menu-speak it creates.

Why "peekytoe"? That's local slang for these crabs, which have legs with a very sharp point that turns slightly inward. "Picked" is Maine-speak for pointed, thus "picked toe" or "peekytoe." Peekytoe crabs cannot be shipped live because they are so perishable. The cooking and picking of peekytoe crabs is still a cottage industry carried out by the wives of lobstermen. What started in their kitchens is now done in FDA-approved buildings constructed next to their homes. The talent of pickers varies from house to house, and high-profile chefs have their favorites. Thomas Keller of the French Laundry in Yountville, California, arguably the finest restaurant in the country, requests that his favorite picker sign each container she picks and packs for him. If you can find peekytoe in your area, you owe it to yourself to give this crab a try.

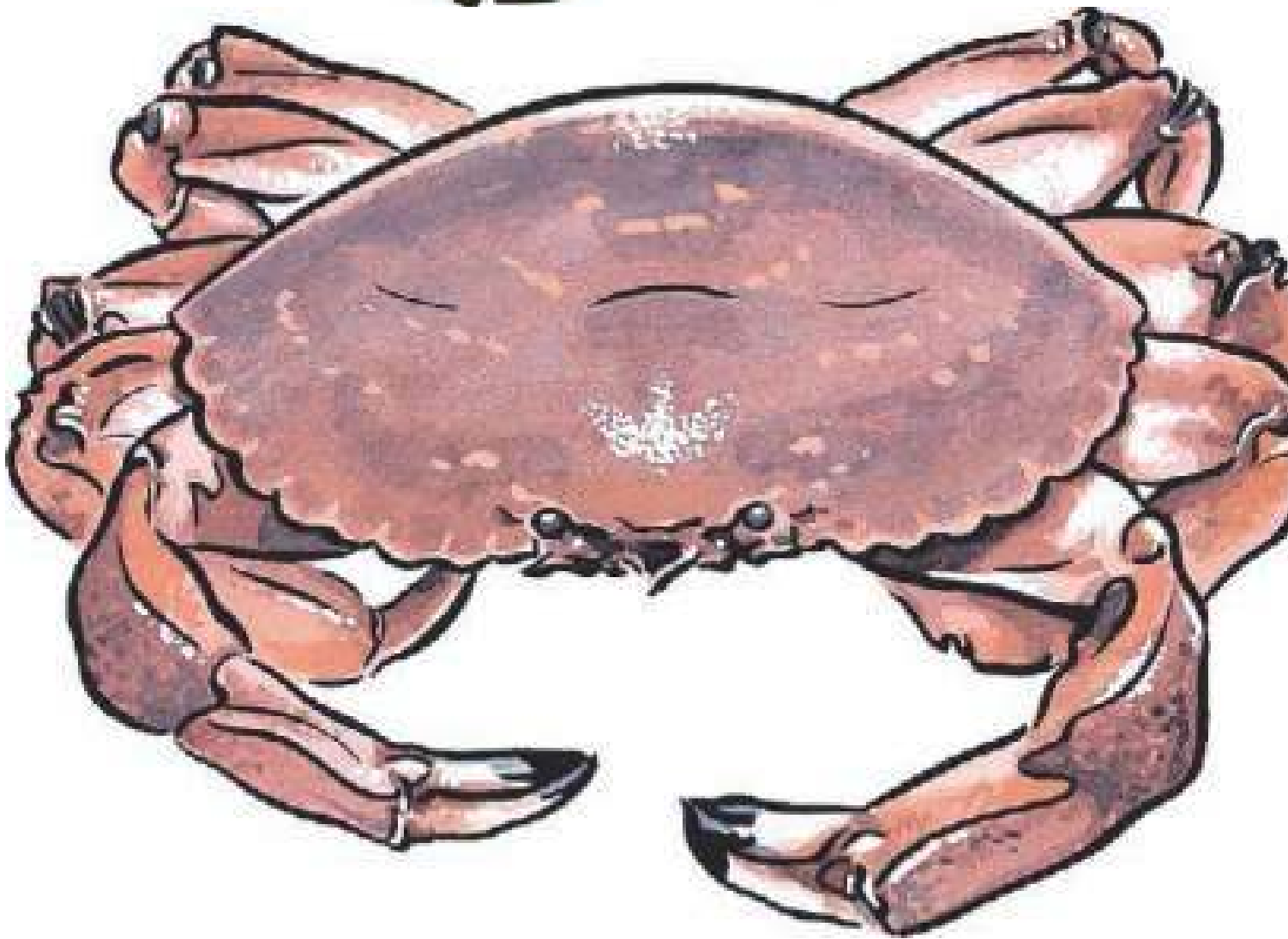
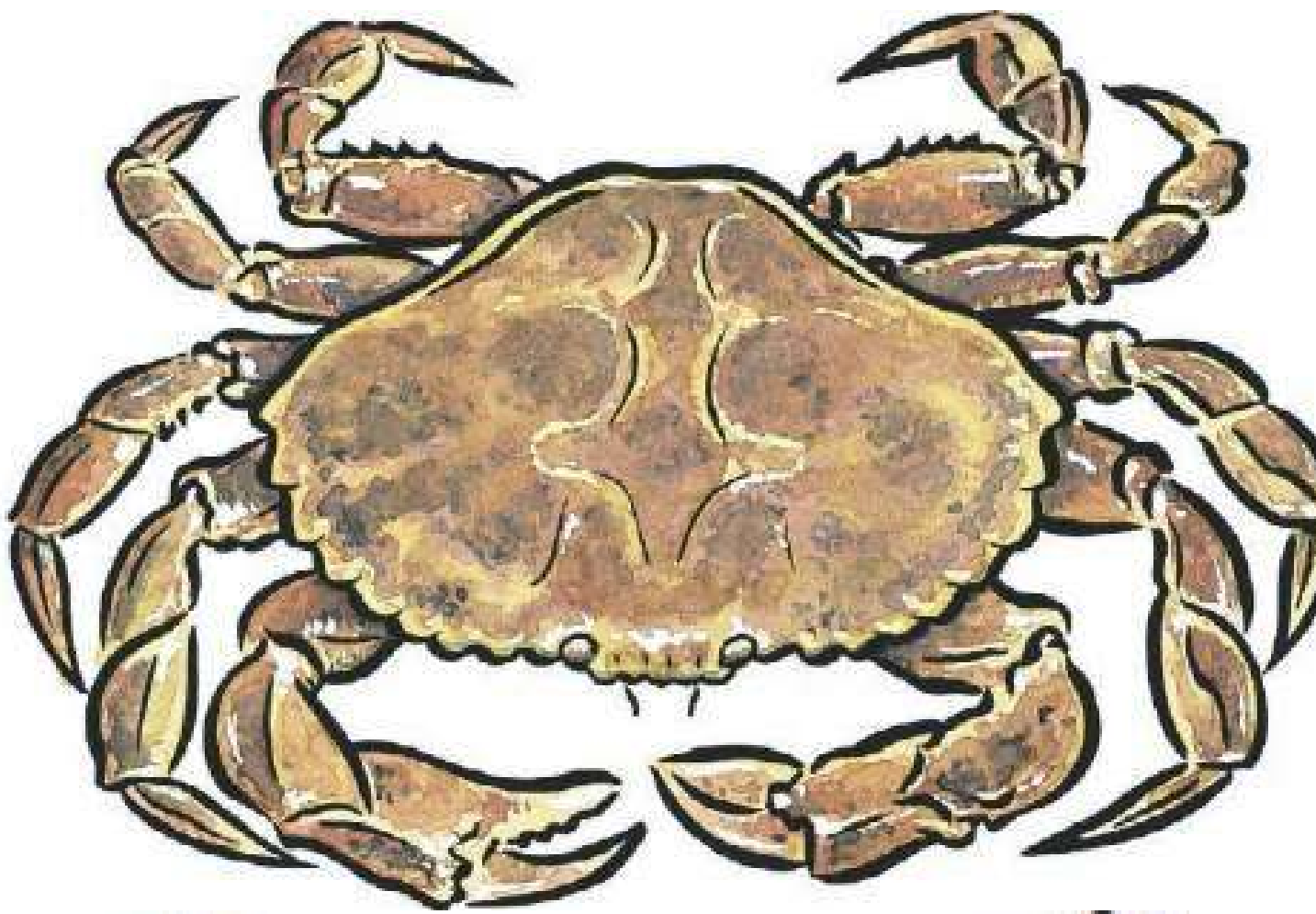
Both Jonah and peekytoe crabs are trapped in pots, some much like lobster traps, and are harvested through the summer and early fall.

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## Portioning a Dungeness Crab

Many recipes calling for a precooked Dungeness crab ask for it to be "cleaned and portioned." Most of the time, your fishmonger will do this for you, or you can buy the portions ready to go. If you have to accomplish this task yourself, it is fairly simple. Remove the top shell and clean the innards out as suggested in [How to Pick a Cooked Crab](#) on [\[>\]](#). Break or cut the crab in half, then break or cut those pieces in half. You'll end up with 4 portions, each containing legs and body meat.

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# Buying and Storing Crabs and Crab Products

When you step up to your favorite seafood counter, the choice of crab products may seem daunting. Go to a coastal region, and that confusion likely will multiply. A little knowledge can go a long way selecting the best crab product for your intended use.

## Live Crabs

A good rule of thumb from crab country is "If the crab ain't kicking, he ain't cooking." No truer word could be said. Blue, Dungeness, and Jonah crabs are those most likely to be sold live. Let your senses and common sense guide you in your purchase.

Blues usually are sorted by sooks and jimmies (see [\[>\]](#)), but not always, so check a few underbellies for the "Capitol dome" or "Washington Monument." Blues are also sold right from the bushel basket they came to market in. Blues are tough fellows, and a day or two out of the water is fine for them. But ask questions as to when the delivery was made and where the crabs came from. Make sure that each crab you or your fishmonger chooses reacts to being picked up and is very active. If not, the crab may be close to death, and you should choose another. Remember, the blues you have purchased are living creatures and need air. Most markets package live crabs in brown paper bags, which is perfect. If your crabs are put in a plastic bag, be sure to poke a few holes in it. If it's warm out, ask for some ice to help keep them cool until you get home. Store them in a loosely closed paper bag in the lower part of your refrigerator. Cook the crabs the same day you buy them if possible, but you can hold them for 24 hours if necessary. The chill will make them subdued, but when you cook them, they should put up a mild fuss when they sense the heat. Discard any that don't.

Live Dungeness and Jonah crabs are sold from a saltwater tank. Once a crab is put in this environment, it stops feeding, and the ratio of meat to shell starts to decrease. Again, ask about where the crabs came from and how long they have been in the tank. Remember to let them breathe, and don't let them lounge in water or ice. Try to cook these crabs the day you buy them. If not, put a damp towel over the crabs in their bag and definitely cook them the next day.

If you want to use Dungeness or Jonah crab in a dish such as a stir-fry, I highly recommend that you have your fishmonger clean the crab. Actually, it's more than a recommendation; just have him do it. You won't regret it; this is not a fun job.

## Cooked Whole Crabs

You are much more likely to see Dungeness and Jonah crabs sold cooked. These crabs are usually cooked within hours of being landed, so the loss of flavor is minimal. Some are then frozen; others are shipped refrigerated. Blue crabs also are sold in some markets already steamed, complete with Chesapeake Bay seasoning (see [\[>\]](#)). Cooked whole crabs should be displayed on ice or in a refrigerated case. Talk with your fishmonger about when the crabs were cooked. You want to consume the crab within 3 to 4 days of its being cooked. Look each crab over for cracks in the shell, make sure



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