

Scrumptious Soft-Shell Crabs

Written by Laura Von Harten

One of the joys of living in the Lowcountry is soft-shell crab season. And it is deliciously imminent. As a matter of fact, by the time you have this newspaper in your hand, the season may be already be upon us.



Local soft-shell crabs are just regular, normal blue crabs -- genus and species *Callinectes sapidus* -- that have lost their hard shells. If harvested before the shell hardens, the crabs are a tasty, tender treat. You eat the whole thing, outsides, insides and all.

You can get frozen soft-shell crabs that are imported from other countries, sometimes at a significant savings because of the availability. After all, there are tons of crabs in lots of warm places, and soft-shell crab season is kind of like, eternal, in tropical climates. But these so-called “mangrove crabs” may be any of various species that grow in the tropics.

When crabs, whether blue or mangrove, are losing their shells, it's called molting. When fishermen come across crabs that are starting to molt, they don't just plunk them down in the bushel basket with the rest of the live crabs. These princes among crabs are far too valuable to be subjected to that indignity. Instead, they are given a temporary reprieve and sent to the crab equivalent of a country club prison. There they get to lounge around, for the rest of their brief lives, in shallow tanks full of water.

Workers keep an eye on the molting crabs and when they see one get nekked, they pluck it out and slap a price tag on it. The trick is to not wait for too long, because once the new shell starts to harden, the crabs lose their value and they revert back to normal crab status.

If you'd like a hands-on peeler crab educational experience, head over Bluffton Oyster Company. They let people come in and look at the tanks of molting crabs they keep in the back room. But make sure the time is ripe. Or right. Or whatever the expression is. When the crabs are ready to receive visitors, there will probably be an article about it in one of the South of Broad daily papers, so keep your eyes open.

I visited Bluffton Oyster Company recently to take a look at what they have that's fresh. They had oysters, of course – shucked oysters in 12 oz. cans or quarts, and oysters in the shell. They also had nice looking mussels and littleneck clams. Also, live crabs, as well as bags of fresh crab meat that is hand-picked on the premises.

The shrimp was previously frozen, but since it's not shrimp season right now, that's to be expected.

While I was in Bluffton I also stopped in at Cahill Market to see what local stuff they were selling. There were a lot of products of uncertain provenance, but they did have a handful of things from the Carolinas. I'm not going to write about the North Carolina stuff, but it's nice to know they have it. And nice to support the local food production efforts of our neighbors to the north.

Cahill had two products with the new “Certified S.C. Product” logo: Old Plantation Pure Cane Molasses, and Old Plantation Old Fashion Syrup. The latter is 38% cane syrup, 62% corn and sucrose syrup. The Old Plantation products come from Russ Brothers Farm in Coward, SC. Cahill also had honey from Hardeeville: Colonial Plantation Raw All-Natural Honey, from Bee

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World Farms. It's available in several sizes, and the label says "no chemical fertilizer/spray." Blackstone's, the casual breakfast & lunch restaurant in downtown Beaufort, also has a few local items on the shelves of their small market area. There are two kinds of rice from Plumfield Plantation, in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina. The brown rice is called Carolina Plantation Aromatic Rice, and the white one is Carolina Gold Rice.

The Carolina Gold has a Green e-Certified logo, which means it's produced with renewable energy. Visit www.green-e.org for more information about businesses that are getting renewable energy certification for their products. Carolina Gold uses actual renewable energy from Palmetto Electric Cooperative, but some of the businesses listed have purchased carbon offsets to get their products certified.

Also at Blackstone's, a South Carolina favorite: Adluh Stone Ground Yellow Grits. These come from the Allen Bros. Milling Company in Columbia.

Back to the soft-shell crabs: if you really love these things, be sure to come to Port Royal's Soft-Shell Crab Festival. This year it's scheduled for April 19, from noon until 5 pm, on Paris Avenue. Soft-shell season is definitely something to celebrate, and Port Royal, the crab capital of South Carolina, is the perfect place to hold the festival.