

A large pile of blue crabs, likely a harvest, is shown on a rocky shore. The crabs are mostly blue with some brown and white markings. They are piled together, with some crabs showing their claws and legs. The background is a mix of dark and light rocks.

The Life of a Blue Crab... Plus Catching, Cooking, and Eating Them!

July 3, 2026

Our Agenda:

- The Life of a Blue Crab
- Techniques for Catching Crabs
 - From a boat
 - From shore
- Cooking crabs
 - Boiling
 - Steaming
- Cleaning and Eating Crabs

The Life of a Blue Crab



Some Facts about Blue Crabs

- The blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) means “beautiful savory swimmer” is a highly mobile estuarine swimmer that lives generally 3-4 years. Crabs become adults in 12 – 18 months depending upon water temperature. They may molt every 4-6 weeks (30 to 50 days) during their active growth phase
 - Blue crabs are found from Argentina to Nova Scotia, including the Gulf.
 - Their maximum size is 9 inches across but most are under 6-1/2”
 - Males have bright blue claws and females have red tips on their claws
 - In New Jersey, they must be 4-1/2” from point to point. Females may be kept as long as they are not carrying any eggs.



More Facts About Blue Crabs

- Males tend to prefer lower salinity water, while females prefer saltier water closer to the ocean. This helps explain why there may be predominance of males or females in the river on tide changes.
- When water temperatures drop in the fall, crabs burrow into the mud for the winter. They will emerge again in the spring.



Even More Facts About Blue Crabs

- Crabs in Louisiana grow faster and larger than crabs in Maryland or New Jersey since the water is warmer all year resulting in faster growth over a longer season.
- If you see live crabs in a local market during the winter, they are brought in from the Gulf.



Identifying Crabs

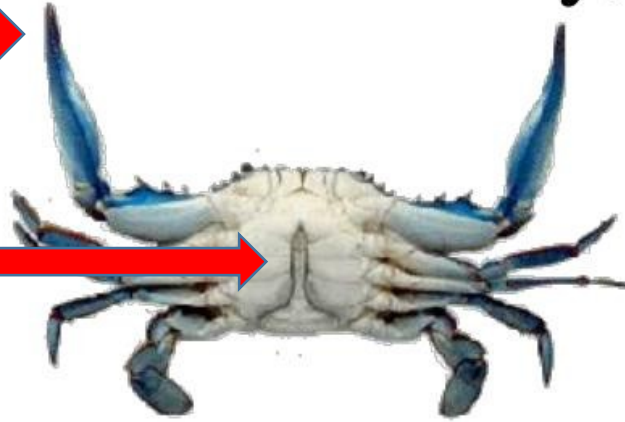
- She-crabs or Sallies: immature females. Apron is triangular and light colored
- Sooks: Adult females with broad aprons. Aprons are dark colored
 - **Large** females are over 5-1/2"
 - **Standard** females are 4-1/2 to 5-1/2" (may be a mix of sooks and sallies)
- Sponges/sponge crabs: females carrying eggs
- Jimmies: Adult males are graded by size.
 - **#1's** are 5-1/2 to 6-1/2"
 - **#2's** are minimum size to 5-1/2"
 - **Jumbo's** are bigger than 6-1/2"
- A crab will molt 18-20 times before they are adult sized. Females stop growing after their only mating, but males continue to molt which is why they grow larger.



How to Tell what Type Crab You Have...

Jimmy, Sook, Sally

Males: Blue tips →



Male: Jimmy
Washington Monument →



Female: Sally
Light, Triangular Apron →



← Females: Red tips



← Female: Sook
Dark, US Capitol



← Female: Sponge
Carrying eggs

Blue Crab Reproduction: They are a hearty lot!

- Mating activity begins in the spring in low salinity waters
- Males:
 - Reach sexual maturity after 12- 18 months, after going through 18-20 molts. They will generally be about 4-5” point to point.
 - In the Gulf, maturity takes about a year. In NJ and MD the timing is closer to 18 months
 - Can mate several times in a season with different females
 - Continue to grow, molt, and mate until they die
- Females:
 - Reach sexual maturity also after 12-18 months.
 - Will mate with a male only once in their lifetime after their final or “terminal” molt. Females stop growing at this point.
 - Can produce several broods from a single mating in a season.
 - Could produce up to 18 broods over several seasons, but generally do not live this long

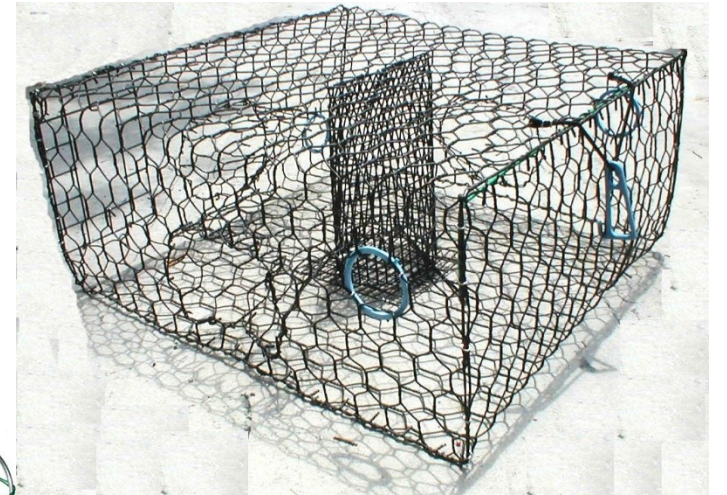
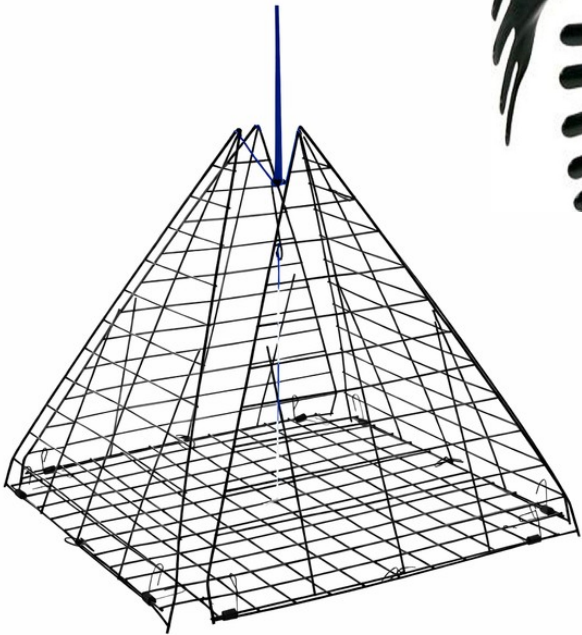
Blue Crab Reproduction: (Continued)

- When mating, the male cradles a female as a “doubler” for a few days before the female’s **terminal molt**. They then protect her from other males until her shell hardens. She will produce several batches of eggs without ever mating again. Only one or two eggs out of every million eggs will mature into an adult crab.
- Once the female swims free, she will migrate to higher salinity waters to spawn. Sometimes, large schools of “sooks” will migrate together.



Note: if you catch a doubler, it is certainly OK to keep the male, but the female should be released. She may be about to molt and mate, or has just mated. Either way she represents future generations of crabs. If she has recently molted, then her shell will also not be full of meat.

Techniques for Catching Crabs



Techniques for Catching Crabs

- Peak season in NJ is August or early September as crabs get larger as the season progresses...since they molt often! Crabbing season in NJ is open legally until the end of November.
- Gear: Dip Net, Size Gauge, Bucket, bait, tongs or gloves
 - Drop line
 - Trot Line
 - Cage
 - Pots or Box Traps
- It's best to go crabbing 1-1/2 to 2 hours either side of high tide. You are not allowed to anchor in a channel, and off channel gets shallow at low tide.
 - Some moving current is helpful since it carries the scent down-current
- When crabbing, don't keep crabs in water as they will deplete the oxygen quickly. (They survive for a day or two out of water.) But keep a rag soaked in salt water over their bucket and keep the bucket in the shade (since heat will kill them quickly)



“Fat or Rusty” vs “Whitey”



Crabs that are bright white (see right) have recently molted and will not be full of meat. As they are often very large, they are “hard” to throw back. They are pretty, but they are likely to be more watery when cooked.



Crabs that are dirty or “rusty” (See left) will be pre-molt and will likely be “heavy” and packed with meat. These are the prime catches of the day!



Catching Crabs: Hand lines



Good – available at local tackle shops. Less expensive



Better – heavy duty, especially in current. Order on Amazon

- Bait with chicken thighs, or parts
- Run needle through skin for better hold
- Use multiple lines at once
- Definitely need a long handle dip net
- Bring net in from behind and under the crab with a swift motion

Catching Crabs: Hand Line

- On my boat, I will tie hand lines to the cleats. At least 6 and as many as 8 – 10 depending upon how many helpers are with me.
- From shore, I will tie hand lines to 5 gallon bucket handles. As many as space allows. If it is a family affair, we have two nets since one is not enough!
- Chicken necks are often referred to as ideal baits, but they are impossible to find. So I use chicken thighs (purchase in the family pack for under \$10)
- Bunker or whole fish such as sea robins are good but don't put as much "aroma" in the water as quickly as chicken meat and won't produce as quickly or as well.
- Crabs can be "on the line" quickly. Check often, but give the crabs a chance to find the bait.

Fun For Everyone!



From shore at Stockton Lake Boulevard

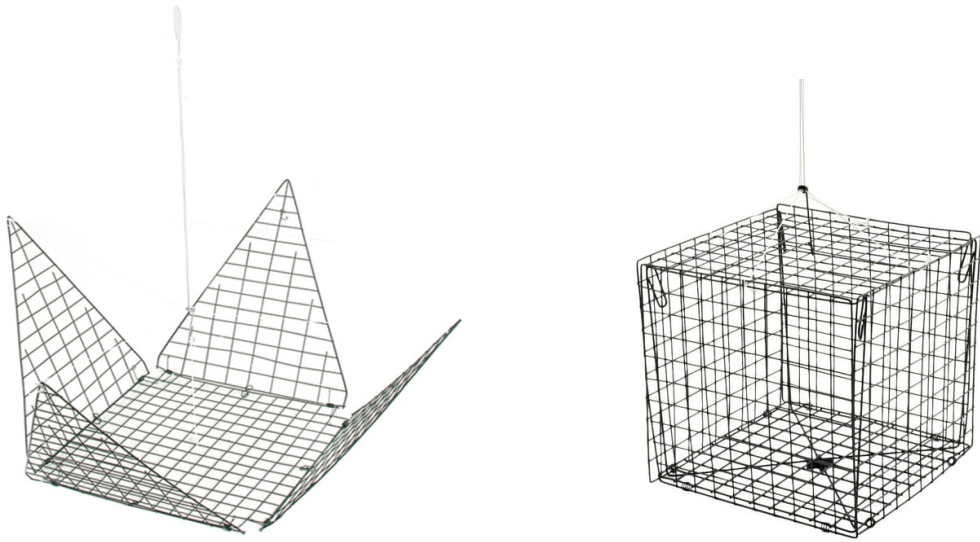


Or from a boat

So You Have a Crab on the Line...No Jerking-- Slow and Steady Wins the Race!

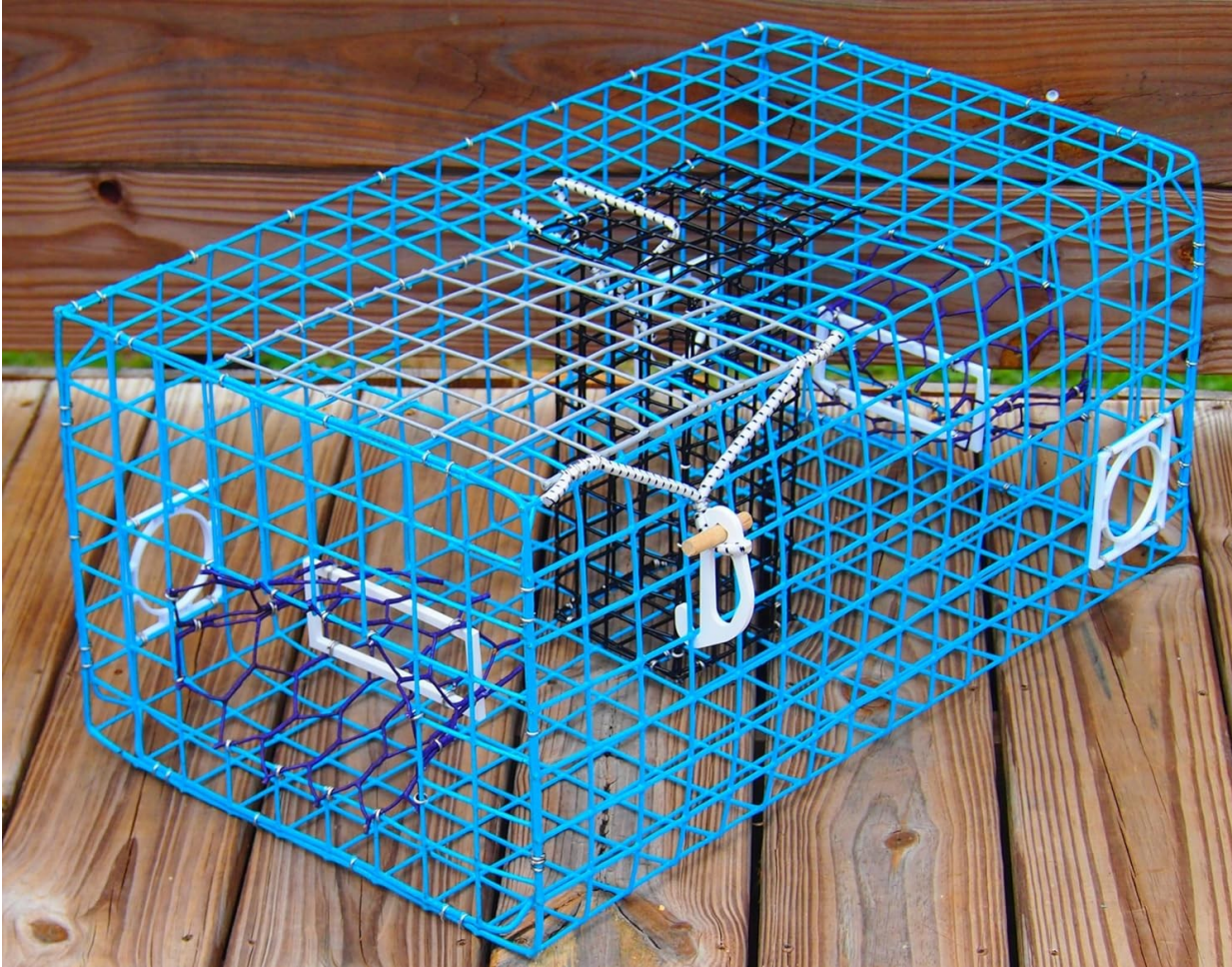
- If the hand line straightens, a crab may be trying to pull your bait.
 - Lift the line gently. If it seems stuck, or “bumps”, then start a **SLOW** hand over hand retrieve.
 - As you pull slowly, if the line seems heavy, or if it starts swinging one way or another, you may have a crab or two on the line.
 - You will see a crab when the bait is about a foot below the surface. Call for or ready your dip net. Do not pull the crab to or through the surface since it will let go!
 - Always bring your dip net up and from behind the crab snaring the bait as well. If you try and net the crab from the front, it will see the net and let go... and the bait may interfere with a smooth pick-up motion.
 - If a crab lets go just before you net it, it will swim down and away and you may still be able to catch it in the dip net if you are coming from under and behind the crab
- If the dip net is busy with another crabber, stop retrieving your line and let it hang in deeper water so the crab doesn't get spooked. Retrieve again when the dip net is available.

Catching Crabs: Cages



- Whether pyramid or box shaped, they work the same way. The sides separate, the crab walks to the center to eat the bait, and a swift lifting motion raises the sides capturing the crab.
- No dip net is needed
- The speed of the retrieve does not matter
- On the downside, the crabber does not “feel” the crab, and it may be a bit harder to transfer the crab to the bucket since the cage can be a bit bulky. Have tongs or gloves for “Crab on the Deck!”

Catching Crabs: Crab-Pot

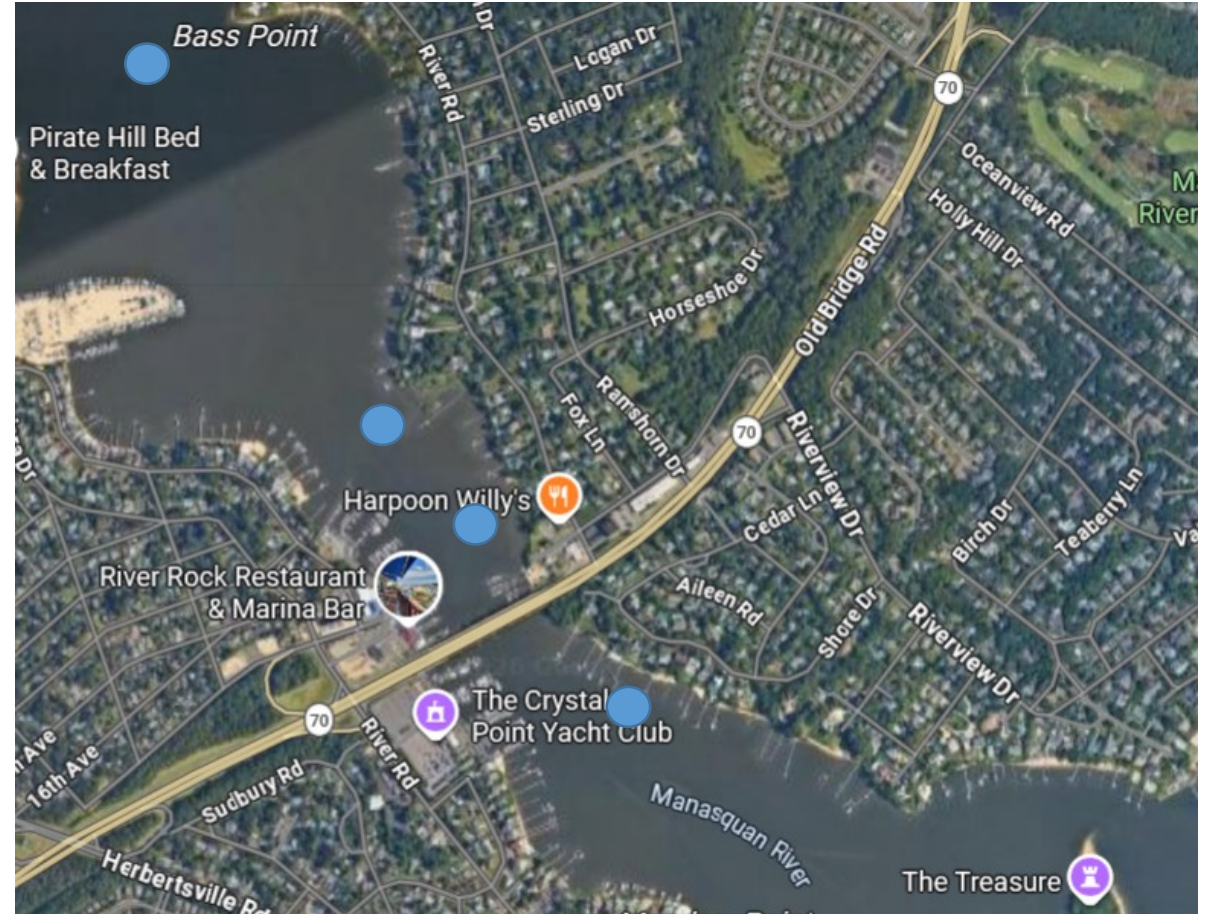


- **Need a \$2 crab pot license for 2 pots**
- Pots can be left in the water overnight with a float that shows your Conservation ID #
- Pots are at risk of being emptied or stolen by poachers
- Bait can be chicken, bunker, fish carcasses, etc.
- Bring tongs, a bucket, and a sizing gauge
- Soak the pot overnight, in 6-10 feet of water, and check it in the morning. Or set it in the morning and check it in the late afternoon or evening.
- Do not place the pot in the channels.
- Pots are at risk for poaching, or theft of the pot itself.
- You could set a pot and then hand line nearby

Where to Catch Them In the Manasquan River

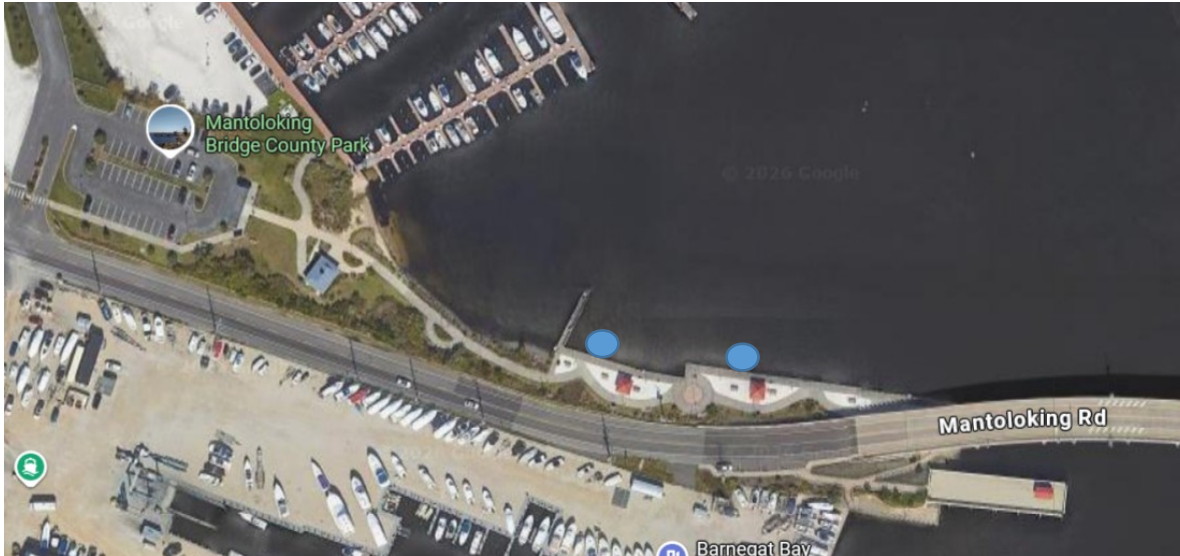
- These boating spots have been highly productive for me over the past several seasons
 - Best depth is 5-10 feet
 - Anchor to avoid drifting
 - Don't anchor in the channel! It's illegal and ill-advised
 - Moving current will carry the scent of the bait bringing in more crabs
 - Slack tide will be less productive
 - If the "bite" slows or fails to show, move your boat

The Beaver Dam Creek is another "hot spot" in the areas near the Beaver Dam Rd. bridge. The areas near the Mantaloking Bridge are also highly regarded locations.



Good Crabbing Spots from Shore

From the bulkhead along Mantoloking Bridge County Park



From bulkhead along Stockton Lake Blvd



Cooking Crabs



Popular Ingredients to Add to Water



Crab Boil Oil



Top Selling Seasonings
Use with boiling or steaming



Add to water to
reduce “foaming”

JO Seasoning vs Old Bay: Which is better?

Both seasonings are about 100 years old, and both founded in Maryland. Both use celery salt, red and black pepper, and paprika. Other spices are a closely held secret!

- JO#2 Seasoning:

- Spicier, more “heat” and robust flavor
- Often targeted to crabs
- Larger “salt crystals” that reputedly adhere to the shells better when steaming crabs
- Popular in the Mid-Atlantic
- Initially targeted to commercial clients, thus present in more crab houses

- Old Bay Seasoning:

- Milder, more herbal flavor with clover, ginger, and coriander
- Versatile, often used for chicken, shrimp, and vegetables in addition to seafood
- Finer, less granular, and considered perfect for crab cakes
- National appeal
- Initially targeted to consumers, owned by McCormick & Company

Ultimately, it is a matter of personal preference!

So, What About Zatarain's Shrimp and Crab Boil?

- Zatarain's Shrimp and Crab Boil is a concentrated oil containing cayenne pepper, garlic, and other spices. There is a devout following in Louisiana
 - It is highly concentrated so follow the instructions carefully. A small amount goes a long way since it adds A LOT of Cajun-style heat.
 - Directions say to start with a small amount and test it, since it is very potent. Add more if desired.
 - Primarily used in boils, but can be used for steaming crabs as well
 - Can be combined with Old Bay or JO #2 for more flavoring
 - Be aware if using around people with seafood allergies

Boiling Crabs (When in Doubt, 15-20 Minutes)

- Commonly referred to as a “crab boil”.
- More widely prevalent in southern states.
- Boiling is often used with large quantities of crab
- It can lead to some flavor loss as the crab’s natural juices may dilute into the boiling water
- Chefs add aromatics such as Old Bay, J.O. Seasoning, or Zatarains Shrimp and Crab Boil Oil to the boiling water. Lemon and/or garlic are other options.
- Consider roughly a gallon of water for a dozen crabs.
- A pour of vinegar will reduce foaming
- **Add the crabs to the vigorously boiling water**
- **Start the clock when the water returns to a boil**
- Jumbo’s = 20-25 minutes; #1’s = 15 -20 minutes; #2’s = 12 – 15 minutes

Steaming Crabs (When in Doubt, 15-20 Minutes)

- Many chefs prefer steaming since it is gentler on the meat, preserving its natural juices and flavors. As such, it might be preferable if there are many female crabs.
- Use a large pot. Steam racks are essential. The lid should fit snugly to trap the steam.
- There should be enough water to produce steam, but not so much that the crabs are submerged. Generally, 2" is suitable. A pour of vinegar will reduce foaming.
- Old Bay, JO #2, and beer are often used to help flavor the crabs
- Arrange the crabs in the steamer basket crab top-side up. Stack up to 3 layers. Cover and heat on medium-high.
- Jumbo's = 20-25 minutes (clock starts with the boil, not before)
- #1's = 15-20 minutes
- #2's = 10- 15 minutes

Grilling and Broiling

- These methods produce slightly different flavor due to caramelization and charring, thereby adding a smoky flavor.
- Often used for legs, claws, or cleaned “halves”
- We will not delve into these techniques but if interested, check them out on YouTube.

Eating “Picking” Crabs



Eating Crabs: Tools of the Trade



Mallet



Cracker and
Picks



Sharp Paring
Knife



Fingers

Eating Crabs

- There are subtle differences in taste between male and female crabs.
- Meat from males often has a firmer texture, and due to their larger size, is chunkier. Often more desired for crab cakes, salads, and stuffed crab shells
- Meat from females is often softer and more tender (as their energy goes into egg production). It is often desirable for soups and sauces requiring a delicate texture. (e.g.- She-crab soup)
- However, the differences are subtle and both genders are delicious when picking!

Eating Crab: Crabby Jack Will Demo at Crab Fest!

- Personal preference and family traditions matter!
- In General:
 1. Only use fresh “lively” crabs
 2. Rinse in cold tap water to stop “cooking” if needed
 3. Let crabs cool before eating
 4. I will twist and break off the claws and legs. Usually, I will leave the rear swimmer legs on the crab as they serve as a handle when eating meat from the large chamber
 5. Pry apron off with a fork, sharp utensil or specialized seafood tool
 6. Lift carapace off body from back edge
 7. There is some meat “in the points”. Some people like this, some do not.
 8. Scrape or pinch off the gills (aka: dead man, lungs)
 9. Pinch and break off the mouth parts
 10. Scrape the organs from the center of the crab.
 11. Eat the mustard if you like (aka: tamale, liver, fat) or scrape or rinse it away

Picking the Crab (Continued)

12. Crack the body into halves

13. Grab a swimmer leg and twist it off the body. This is when you get “the big bite!”

14. Grabbing the “half” either cut or pull apart the top and bottom essentially creating “quarters”

15. Work your way chamber by chamber from back to front for both top and bottom sections

16. Repeat 13 -15 for the other half of the crab

17. I eat the claws last, but some people prefer to eat them before the body meat

17. If the crab is large, you can squeeze the meat out of the legs (like with lobster legs)...but I don't usually find it worthwhile.

17. The meat is sweet if you eat it directly from the shell, but many people elect to dip the crab into melted butter, Old Bay, etc.

17. Repeat steps 1 - 19 with additional crabs.

Enjoy! Crab Fest 2026 is August 18th!

