



# Sideways into Favour

One of the most underrated of the crustacean family, crabs always promise good eating.

There are well over 1,000 species of crabs

(decapoda reptantia or 'ten-footed crawlers') worldwide. They are mostly bottom dwellers in marine habitats, from intertidal flats and rock pools to depths of 500 metres; and sand, mud, rock, seaweed and seagrass to coral. From the tiny oyster (or pea) crabs which make their homes in live oysters to the world's heaviest crab—the Giant Crab (weighing up to 17.5 kilograms) found in Australia's southern waters, they vary greatly in size, colour and appearance, but many share the same delicious soft, moist, sweet flesh. And the good news is that they're often less expensive than other comparable crustacea, maybe because there's a little more work involved in extracting the meat—but the rewards at the end are well worth it!

Here are some of the more common crabs you're likely to encounter around this region.

**Mangrove, or Serrated, Crabs** (*Scylla serrata*) are found on the muddy bottoms of shallow coastal mangroves. Like many popular crabs in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere), they belong to the family of 'swimmers', which can be identified by flat paddles on the end of their back legs. There are a number of closely related serrated crabs living in mangroves, sheltered estuaries and tidal flats, mainly differentiated by colour and habitat. The mangrove crab (sometimes called Giant Mud Crab) with its reddish brown to black shell and absence of spots or other marking, is by far the most important edible crab in Southeast Asia. They may weigh over 1 kilogram and the males are prized for their size and meatiness, but females offer the bonus of eggs. They're mostly sold live (as they can live out of water for days) but are also available cooked. It is best not to buy dead uncooked mangrove crabs as it's difficult to determine their quality. They yield about 25 percent meat (largely from the claws) and have sweet flesh.

Other serrated crabs include **Estampador, or Green Mud, Crab** (*Scylla paramamosain*) with a pale green shell and pale yellow-brown tips to the claws, also called banana, or white, crab; **Purple Mud Crab** (*Scylla tranquebarica*) is grey-green to dark green with purple tints; and **Orange Mud Crab** (*Scylla olivacea*) which is slightly smaller than the others.

**Blue Swimming, or Flower, Crabs** (*Portunus pelagicus*) are distinctive for the mottled bright blue to purple of the males' shell (the females tend to be more mottled brown). They are found throughout Asia and Australia as well as along the east coast of Africa. They



average about 300 grams and, like all crustacea, turn orange when cooked. They are one of the few crabs sold dead but uncooked (green), but aren't sold live as they don't survive well, once captured. They yield about 35 percent meat and have a sweet, nutty flavour, slightly milder and softer than that of mangrove crabs.

**Three-spot Swimming Crabs** (*Portunus sanguinolentus*) named for the three distinct white-edged purple/red spots towards the back of their greenish-yellow shells are closely related to blue swimming crabs. The meat of both crabs is sometimes candied in palm sugar syrup as a snack. Another relative, the **Mask**, or **Crucifix, Crabs** (*Charybdis feriata*) have

distinctive vertical dark brown to purple stripes on their shells said variously to resemble a mask, crucifix or, in some languages, even a zebra. Small examples are sometimes pickled in fish sauce or coated whole in palm sugar as a snack.

**Vinegar Crabs** (*Episesarma* species) measure just 4 to 5 centimetres across their shells and are often sold pickled in vinegar. They live in mangrove swamps (and so are also known as mangrove crabs but shouldn't be confused with the much larger serrated crabs). These small crabs are not swimmer crabs, but have the ability to climb trees at high tide, providing a tasty treat for the fishermen who 'pick' them from the trees at night, cover them in salt and eat them the next day.

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## Other Popular Crabs Around The World

In the USA, the **Blue Crab** (*Callinectes sapidus*) reigns supreme, at least on the east coast, as is indicated by its Latin name ('callinectus' is Greek for 'beautiful swimmer'; 'sapidus' is Latin for 'savoury or tasty'). It is very similar to the blue swimming crab described above. Native to North America, it is found from Delaware Bay to Florida and the Gulf States with the biggest catch in Chesapeake Bay, Maryland. It has been recently introduced to the eastern Mediterranean, where it is thriving.

**Dungeness Crabs** (*Cancer magister*) share the same prestige in the Pacific Northwest region of North America. They are common from central California to Alaska. **Southern Stone Crabs** (*Menippe mercenaria*) are found mainly in Florida. Their bodies are usually discarded in favour of the prized, very large claws (one usually larger than other) tipped in black.

**Snow Crabs** (*Chionoecetes opilio*) and **King**, or **Red, Crabs** (*Paralithodes cantchatica*) are both fished in the colder Arctic waters from northern Japan and around North America, Canada and western Greenland. They are both prized for their extraordinarily long legs, which are exported as frozen claws and legs as well as canned meat.

In Europe, especially the UK, where it almost has the market to itself, the **Brown**, or **Common, Crab** (*Cancer*

*pagurus*) is king. With a brownish red oval shell, often 20-centimetre wide, and strong black-tipped claws, it is caught year round around the British Isles and as far north as Norway, but is considered at its best from January to March. White meat is found mainly in the claws, making them most highly prized, but many European recipes make good use of the brown meat in the body. They typically yield 33 percent meat, only one third of it white.

### Soft Shell Crabs

All crabs shed their shell from time to time as they grow. Once they moult, they have a period of about 24 hours when their new shell is developing and hardening and they are edible shell-and-all. So soft shell crabs are not a particular species of crab, but any crab that's undergoing this process. Some crabs however, are more commonly sold with soft shells. On the east coast of the USA, it's the highly prized blue crab that is harvested from the wild, while in Asia it's often the mangrove crab. In Australia, high-tech aquaculture has begun, with blue swimmer, coral, three-spotted and mud crabs being carefully monitored by robotics that detect when the crabs have just moulted and remove them from the salt water to a fresh water enclosure which delays the recalcification of their shells.







# CRAB & ASPARAGUS SOUP

serves 6

300g cooked crabmeat  
1.5ltr chicken stock  
½ tsp finely grated ginger  
10 spears green asparagus, sliced on the diagonal  
3 green onions, finely sliced on the diagonal  
1 tsp sesame oil  
2 tbsp cornflour, made into a paste with 2 tbsp water  
2 eggs, lightly beaten  
handful coriander leaves (optional)  
salt flakes and freshly ground white pepper, to taste

1. Place chicken stock in a pan and bring to a boil.
2. Add ginger and asparagus spears. Return to the boil, reduce heat, cover and simmer for about 5 minutes until asparagus is just tender.
3. Add the green onions, sesame oil and cornflour paste, increase heat and stir until soup thickens.
4. Reduce heat, add crabmeat and slowly pour in egg, stirring slowly so that the egg forms thin ribbons through the soup.
5. Taste, add salt and pepper and serve garnished with coriander leaves if you like.

## BUYING CRABS

Regardless of the type of crab, look for ones which feel heavy for their size and have legs and claws intact. With dead crabs, if possible, give them a gentle shake to ensure there's no sound of sloshing water. Live crabs should be vigorous.

## KILLING CRABS

The most humane and easiest method to kill any crustacea is to chill them in the freezer for about 45 minutes until they become insensible (but not long enough to freeze them). Once chilled, they should be killed promptly by splitting them in half or dropping them into rapidly boiling water.

## STORING CRABS

Keep live crabs in a cool place with a damp cloth over the container. Cooked or dead crabs should be wrapped in plastic wrap or foil and stored in an airtight container in the fridge for up to three days, or frozen for up to three months (at minus 18oC or lower). Picked crabmeat can be stored in the same way.

## COOKING CRABS

Crabs can be steamed, poached, deep-fried, stir-fried, pan-fried, grilled, barbecued, pickled or candied. Don't try to pick raw crabmeat, it's almost impossible as the flesh is too watery. If a recipe calls for crabmeat, place chilled whole crabs in a large pot of rapidly boiling water, which has been well-salted (half cup table salt to 2.5 litres water), for eight minutes per 500 grams (timed from when the water returns to the boil). Some sources suggest that adding a little vinegar to the cooking liquid makes it easier to remove the meat from the shell. Refresh them in iced water and, when cool enough to handle, twist off legs and claws, crack and remove the meat with a crab pick, skewer or crochet hook. Tip the body of the crab over and, from underneath, lift off the top shell, most of the inedible organs will come away attached to the shell. Break off the eyes and the shell holding them in place. Lift out and discard the grey feathery gills (deadmen's fingers) from the body, use a small spoon to remove the internal organs (or brown meat), then wipe clean with a clean damp cloth. Some recipes call for the brown meat, to add a deeper flavour to the dish, others require only white meat, so, if picking both, keep them separate. Clean the top shell for use in presentation if you like. Quarter the crab and pick out all the white meat from the body. If stir-frying or marinating crabs, chill and split the crabs, then clean as above without removing legs and claws, quarter and crack legs and claws with nutcrackers so flavours can penetrate.

## SERVING CRAB

Serve boiled crab with dipping sauces such as nam pla, mayonnaise (flavoured with mustard, garlic or herbs) or hot melted butter with a







# CRAB CAKES

serves 6 as an entrée

500g cooked crabmeat  
1 egg, lightly beaten  
2 tbsp whole-egg mayonnaise  
1 tbsp Dijon mustard  
¼ tsp ground cayenne pepper  
½ cup fresh breadcrumbs  
⅓ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley  
6 wedges lemon, to serve  
fresh breadcrumbs, to coat crab cakes  
clarified butter, for pan-frying  
coleslaw or small salad leaves, to serve  
few drops Tabasco sauce  
dash Worcestershire sauce  
whole-egg mayonnaise, to serve  
salt flakes

1. Combine egg, mayonnaise, Tabasco, mustard, Worcestershire sauce, cayenne and salt in a large bowl.
2. Add crabmeat, breadcrumbs and parsley and mix well, but gently so as not to break up the crabmeat too much.
3. Form mixture into 12 balls, place on a plate and refrigerate for 1 hour.
4. In the palm of your hands, flatten balls into discs and coat well with breadcrumbs.
5. Melt clarified butter in a frying pan and fry crabcakes, in batches if necessary, turning once until golden on both sides. Keep warm in a low oven while cooking remaining batches if necessary.
6. Serve with a small mound of coleslaw or salad and a wedge of lemon and pass extra mayonnaise separately.

squeeze of lemon juice. Do not re-cook cooked crabs. Pick out the meat and use it in salads, sandwiches, as a garnish for soups or in dishes where it is just gently warmed, such as pasta stuffing or sauces, crab cakes and omelettes.

Crab goes well with soy sauce, lemongrass, fish sauce, chilli, lime, ginger, coconut, lemon, coriander, tarragon, dill, parsley, chervil, nutmeg, turmeric, anchovies, butter, cream and tomatoes.

## CRAB TERMINOLOGY

Crab sticks aren't made from crab. Their official name is surimi and they're made from inexpensive fish with flavourings and colourings added.

Many recipes talk about brown and white meat in crabs. The brown meat is the internal organs (sometimes also called oily, or fatty, meat), prized in some cultures, but generally not given as high an acclaim as the white meat found mainly in the claws.

Dressed crabs are often sold in the UK, this means the cooked meat is extracted from the shell and presented in the cleaned top shell in rows, usually with a row of brown meat on either side and a row of white meat in the middle. It may be pure, but may also have extenders, such as breadcrumbs, and seasonings added.

### A crab by any other name

**Burmese** - nan

**Thai** - pu

**Vietnamese** - cua

**Malaysian** - ketam

**Chinese** - xie (Hong Kong - haai)

**Japanese** - kani

**Scottish** - partan

**French** - crabe

**German** - krabbe

**Swedish/Danish** - krabba

**Norwegian** - krabbe

**Icelandic** - krabbi

**Dutch** - krab

**Russian** - krab

**Italian** - granchio

**Spanish** - cangrejo

**Greek** - kahvooree

**Turkish** - yengeç