

# craving crustaceans

THE MOST FAMILIAR CRUSTACEANS ENJOYED BY MANY, PRAWNS IN ALL SHAPES, SIZES AND FORMS, ARE VERSATILE WHATEVER THE COOKING METHOD.



**F**rom Greenland to the tip of South America, prawns are one of the widely available and most versatile seafood worldwide. There are hundreds of different species, living mostly in salt, or brackish waters, with a few freshwater varieties found in rivers and lakes. They range from the tiny specimens used for making prawn paste to giants as large as small lobsters. Thankfully they tend to be sold by size, cooked or uncooked,

and fresh or frozen, rather than by specific species, which seem to confuse even the experts. When raw (commonly referred to as 'green'), they vary in colour from translucent through grey-green to bright red, though, as with all crustaceans, they take on shades of reddish brown to bright orange when cooked.

There is some confusion between the words 'prawn' and 'shrimp'. In the United States 'shrimp' is the common term, even for large specimens often referred to as 'jumbo shrimp'. In Britain, 'shrimp' is used for smaller specimens and 'prawn' refers to the larger ones. While in Australia, 'prawn' is the term commonly used for all species and sizes.

### Prawns marry well with:

Olive oil, cream, butter  
Ginger, garlic, onion, green onion, chilli  
Aniseed (Pernod, fennel)  
Sesame seeds  
Fresh herbs—dill, tarragon, parsley, chervil,  
chives, coriander  
Salt, soy sauce, fish sauce  
Lemons, limes  
Tomato  
Honey  
Mayonnaise  
Rice wine  
Noodles, rice

### BUYING & STORING

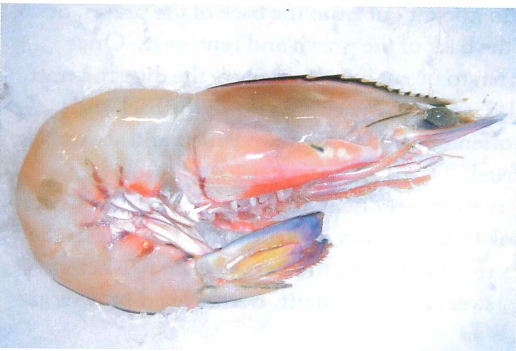
Prawns are highly perishable in their raw state and thus, are often frozen or boiled at sea, as soon as they are caught. Cooked prawns are good in salads and sandwiches, or eaten cold with a dipping sauce. They should not be reheated, as this will toughen them. If using prawns in a cooked dish, buy green (raw) prawns.

When buying prawns, cooked or raw, look for firmly attached heads and tight, firm shells with a good sheen. There shouldn't be any blackening around the head or legs as this is a sign of oxidation, and they should have a pleasant 'fresh sea' smell. One kilogram of prawns in the shell should yield about 500 grams of prawn meat.

Leave prawns in their shell until just before using them, and store them in an airtight container in the refrigerator should you need to. It is always best to buy seafood as close as possible to the time you'd be using them. Fresh prawns however, cooked or raw, should be kept refrigerated for up to three days only, but can be frozen to keep for up to three months. Once thawed, frozen prawns should not be refrozen.

### USES

Prawns turn up in almost every cuisine: served cold with a squeeze of lemon; barbecued (as it is often done in Australia); dressed up with crisp lettuce leaves and served with a tomato-spiked mayonnaise (cocktail sauce); in the prawn



cocktails that were the height of fashion in the 1960s and 70s; in French bisques; Southeast Asian curries; Japanese tempura and sushi; English potted shrimp; Spanish garlic prawns; Vietnamese sugarcane prawns (chao tom) and Chinese drunken prawns. They marry well with a wide range of flavours and are suitable for most cooking styles.

Tomalley, the coral or mustard from prawn heads, gives a concentrated prawn flavour when cooked. It is used to add richness to some Thai curries and is responsible for the distinctive flavour of prawn bisques and shellfish reduction sauces.

Because prawns are so perishable, many ways have been developed to preserve them. Prawn crackers (krupuk udang in Indonesia and Malaysia and banh phong tom in Vietnam) are usually made from tapioca or rice starch flavoured with salt, sugar and varying amounts of prawn or other seafood. They are sun or commercially-dried, and re-hydrated by deep-frying to be served as a snack or side dish. If stored in a dry place, they keep almost indefinitely.

Shrimp paste (belachan in Malaysia, terasi in Indonesia, gapi in Thailand, bagoong in the Philippines and balich o in Macao) is an essential seasoning in many Southeast Asian dishes. It is made from tiny prawns, which are salted, sun-dried, pounded into a paste and fermented in the humid Southeast Asian heat. It varies in flavour and intensity from country to country (or even region to region within some countries). It is always cooked to mellow its very pungent aroma and flavour. Sometimes, it is mixed into a curry paste before frying and other times grilled or fried before being blended into a sauce or paste. It keeps almost indefinitely without refrigeration. The English make a shrimp paste, but it is not fermented and is used as a spread rather than as a seasoning. It consists of cooked and pounded prawn meat (from small prawns or shrimp), mixed with some butter and seasoning (typically mace, cayenne and anchovy sauce).

Indian balachong (also known as balichow or balachow) is a southern Indian pickle sometimes made from fresh salted prawns, but also from mangoes or dried duck eggs. It is hot and strongly flavoured and is eaten as a relish with curries.

Dried prawns or shrimp are very small prawns, shelled, boiled in brine and dried. They are used as a garnish and to add flavour to spring rolls, rice and vegetable dishes.

#### SOME COMMON PRAWNS:

**Tiger** prawns are pale brown to blue-green with distinct grey, blue or black stripes. They are the most common aquaculture prawn in Southeast Asia and Australia and are exported around the world.

**King** prawns have a cream to light brown body with distinctive bright blue legs and tailfin. They are generally larger than tiger prawns.

**Banana** or white prawns are farmed in Thailand and caught by trawlers in northern Australian waters. They are translucent to yellow in colour with some tiny dark spots.

**Freshwater** prawns are easily identified by their much longer second pair of legs with prominent pincers, making them look more like a freshwater crayfish or scampi. They are farmed in many countries.



#### PREPARING & EATING

The edible part of the prawn is sometimes referred to as the 'tail', although technically the tail is the fan-like fins at the end of the body. It is actually the body of the prawn that is most commonly eaten minus the head, shell, legs and tail fins, although very small prawns are sometimes fried and eaten whole.

To peel a prawn, break off the head and, from underneath, break off the legs and shell working your way around the prawn from the head to the tail. The tailfin can be left on for appearances, or to provide a 'handle' if the prawns are to be eaten with the fingers, it can be pinched off in one piece.

The prawn's digestive tract runs along the back of the body and is best removed in all but the smallest of prawns. After removing the head from fresh green prawns, hold the prawn straight and gently pull the end of the digestive tract (from the head end), it will usually come out in one go. If it breaks off, use a thin skewer to hook it out from the back of the prawn, or make a small incision along the back of the prawn and remove it. Once prawns are cooked, the back has to be cut open to remove the digestive tract. 'Butterflied' prawns are peeled, with tail intact, split down the back and flattened out; these are also often referred to as prawn cutlets and are usually served crumbed and deep-fried.

Prawns, like all seafood, require very little cooking. It is always better to undercook than overcook them, as they will continue to cook in the residual heat when they are removed from the pan. While perfectly cooked prawns are springy, sweet and succulent, overcooked prawns are dry, rubbery and tasteless. **WD**



## BBQ PRAWNS WITH HERB MARINADE

Serves 6 as an entrée

24 medium green king prawns  
24 15-cm bamboo skewers

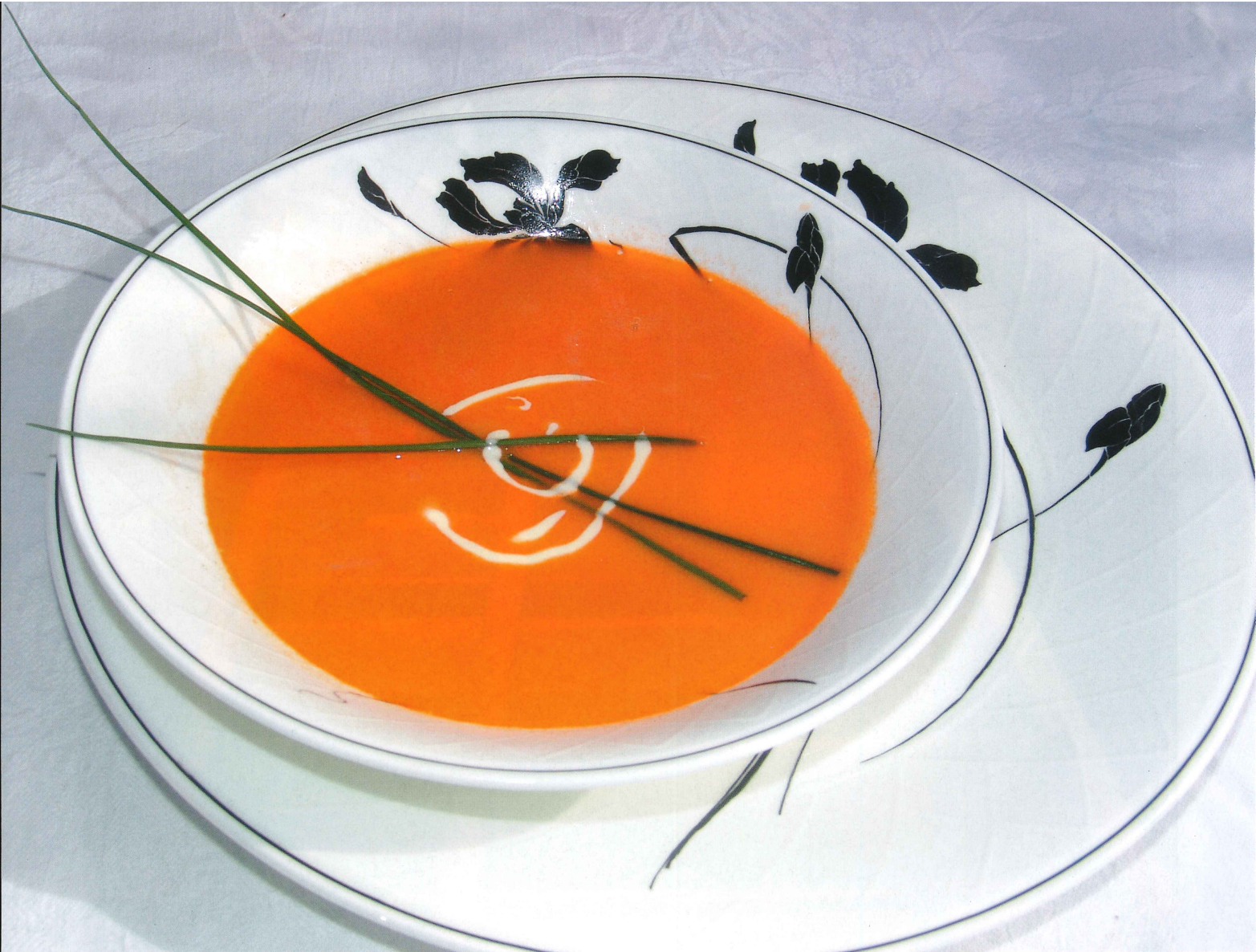
$\frac{1}{2}$  bunch flat-leaf parsley  
1 bunch coriander  
3 cloves garlic, peeled  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp ground cumin  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp paprika  
50ml lemon juice  
125ml extra virgin olive oil

125ml thick natural yoghurt  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  preserved lemon, flesh only thinly sliced  
pinch cayenne pepper  
salt to taste

1. Combine coriander and parsley, garlic, salt, cumin, paprika, cayenne, and lemon juice in a food processor, process until well chopped. 2. Add olive oil and process until a smooth paste is formed. 3. Peel and de-vein prawns, leaving tails intact. 4. Push a skewer through each prawn from the head end to the tail end. 5. Pour half the marinade

over the prawns and coat well. Cover and refrigerate for 1 hour. 6. Heat grill or BBQ to medium hot, oil lightly. 7. Cook prawns for 2 - 3 minutes each side, turning when they become opaque. 8. Meanwhile, combine reserved marinade with the yoghurt and preserved lemon to make a dipping sauce. 9. Serve the grilled prawns with the sauce on the side.

**Notes:** Instead of being skewered, the prawns can be marinated, then stir-fried and served with steamed rice. The sauce can be drizzled over the top or served separately.



## PRAWN BISQUE

Serves 6 as an entrée

The flavour of this bisque comes from the shells and the tomalley in the heads. When peeling prawns for other dishes, save the shells and heads and freeze them until you have enough.

750g green prawn shells and heads  
(from about 24 large prawns)

100g butter

1 onion, chopped

50g plain flour

250ml white wine

1ltr water

125ml cream

1 tbsp brandy

1/2 bunch chervil or chives

a little extra cream

salt & freshly ground white pepper, to taste

I. Melt butter in a large saucepan and sauté onion until soft. 2. Add prawn heads and fry until they turn red. Crush prawn heads with a meat mallet or wooden spoon as they are frying—it is important that heads are crushed as much as possible. 3. Add flour and stir over medium heat for 3 - 5 minutes until flour is cooked out. 4. Add wine and stir for a minute. 5. Add water and bring to a boil. 6. Reduce heat and simmer gently for 20 - 30 minutes. 7. Strain, pushing through a fine sieve to extract as much liquid as possible from shells. Discard solids. 8. Pass soup through a muslin cloth to remove any remaining solids. 9. Return soup to a clean pan, add cream and simmer to heat through. 10. Taste and season if necessary. 11. Add brandy just before serving and stir through. 12. Serve with a swirl of fresh cream garnished with some chopped chervil or chives.

## PRAWNS BY OTHER NAMES

Arabic - gembri  
Bengali - chingri  
Burmese - pazun  
Cambodian - bangkear  
Cantonese - ha/ba  
Danish - reje  
Dutch - garnaal  
Filipino - alamang/tangunton  
French - crevette  
German - crevetten, garnele  
Greek - garída  
Indonesian - udang  
Italian - gambero  
Japanese - ebi  
Korean - baek ha  
Laotian - koug  
Malay - udang  
Mandarin - xia  
Norwegian - reke  
Polish - garnela  
Portuguese - gamba, camarão  
Russian - krevetka  
Spanish - gamba, camarón  
Swedish - räka  
Thai - goong/kung  
Turkish - karides  
Vietnamese - tôm