

How to Cook and Clean a Fresh Dungeness Crab

by [canida](#) on January 16, 2007

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intro: How to Cook and Clean a Fresh Dungeness Crab

If you live on the Pacific coast, this is necessary information. Why settle for soggy, pre-cooked crab when you can prepare it fresh?



step 1: Get a fresh crab

There are many options.

- 1) Go crabbing. Get your fishing license and set out some crab traps! If you've got a boat, or a friend with a boat, this should be easy. If not, consider getting a free boat.
- 2) Buy a fresh crab. Your local farmers' market might have a fresh crab stand; I got mine at the Oakland Grand Lake market. Seafood shops, yuppie grocers, and asian grocery stores may also carry fresh crab.
- 3) Buy a pre-cooked crab. This is sub-optimal, but will do if you really can't find a live source. In this case proceed to step 4 to clean your crab.

Note that a happy crab will be active and feisty when disturbed. Pick him up with tongs or carefully with your hands, making sure to grab at the back of the shell. The crab can reach pretty far back under his body to pinch, but your upper fingers are quite safe. You can also grab hold of a couple of back legs on either side to immobilize your crab, but be careful not to break them off.



Image Notes

1. A display of claw-waving defiance.
2. Watch the fingers on the crab's belly! He can probably reach these, so be ready to adjust your grip.
3. This "apron" shape designates a male crab. Females have a shorter, wider apron.

step 2: Cook

Steam or boil your crab at ~7-8 minutes/pound, lid on but cocked to allow a bit of venting. I chose to steam mine because I've got a large steamer insert, and steam decreases the amount of water retained in the body cavity. Boiling will get the job done quite well, though, and you're more likely to have a big pot than a big steamer.

If you're adding a large number of crabs, start your timer when the water comes back to a boil. Base your number of minutes on the **average crab weight**, *not* the sum total.

Round times down whenever necessary; raw crabs can always be cooked further, while overcooked rubbery crab is unsalvageable. Thankfully there's a decent margin for error in crab-cooking.

If you're boiling, you can add some seasonings to your water. Add salt (or use sea water), a bay leaf, some celery chunks, a carrot, some pepper corns, and any other whole spices you've got sitting around. Pre-mixed crab boil seasonings are available, but not necessary.

NOTE: you can clean your crabs *before* cooking. This keeps the mess out of the pot and allows for more crabs in the space. Just follow the instructions from steps 3-9, then cook according to this step's directions. However, this approach does require vivisection, which freaks some people out. Take your pick. Also, if you've pre-cleaned and halved your crabs, re-weigh the parts to determine cooking time.



Image Notes

1. Tuck those legs in and slap a lid on. The clanking will stop shortly.



Image Notes

1. If I tried to put him in right-side-up he'd catch his feet on the sides. Upside down is much easier.

step 3: Rinse and cool

Remove your crab from the pot, and rinse under cool water in the sink. This will stop the cooking process, cool down the shell enough for you to handle, and rinse off any icky crab guts that may have oozed out during cooking.

Flip him over a couple of times to get both sides with the spray.

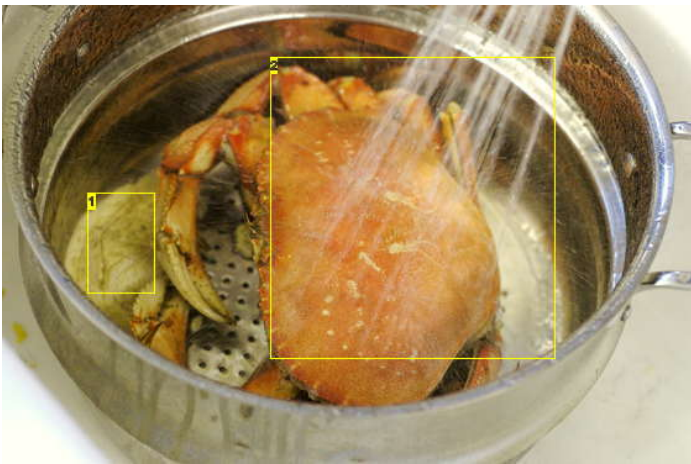


Image Notes

1. Some mystery crab goo that oozed out and coagulated during cooking. Discard.
2. Rinse with cold water until cool enough to handle.

step 4: Remove the apron

Flip up the apron and use your thumb to break it off at the back of the shell.

This is a male crab; the female's apron is wider and more oval in shape. Female crabs must be thrown back to keep the population up.



Image Notes

1. Insert thumb at the base of the apron.



step 5: Remove carapace

Stick your thumb into the hole left from removing the apron, and lift up gently but firmly. The carapace will detach from the body, trailing lots of attached guts. Fully remove the carapace.

If you want to keep the carapace for serving or dry it for your next art project, remove all of the squishy bits from its nooks and crannies. You may need to employ a small brush or tool to remove guts from the furthest recesses. After you've dislodged everything, give it a thorough spraying to make sure you've rinsed all the yuck off. Now you're ready to fill it with crab salad, or a seasoned crab/breadcrumb mixture for baked stuffed crab.

If you're drying the shell, give it a soapy scrub as well before leaving it in a warm, dry spot to dry out. An oven on the "keep warm" setting is great for this if you're in an otherwise humid place.

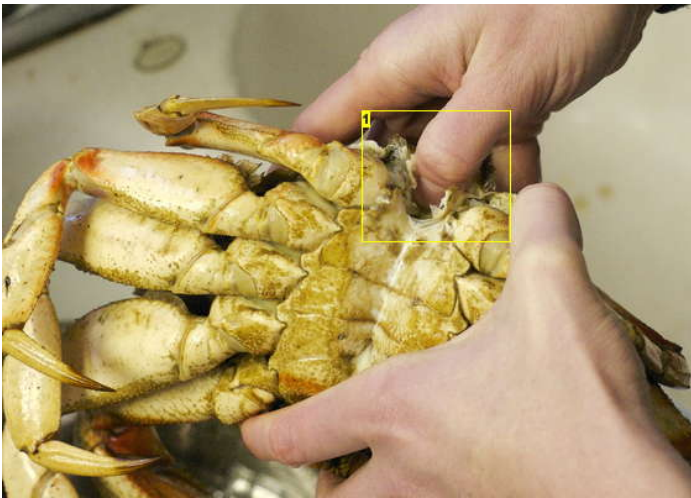


Image Notes

1. Thumb in the hole.

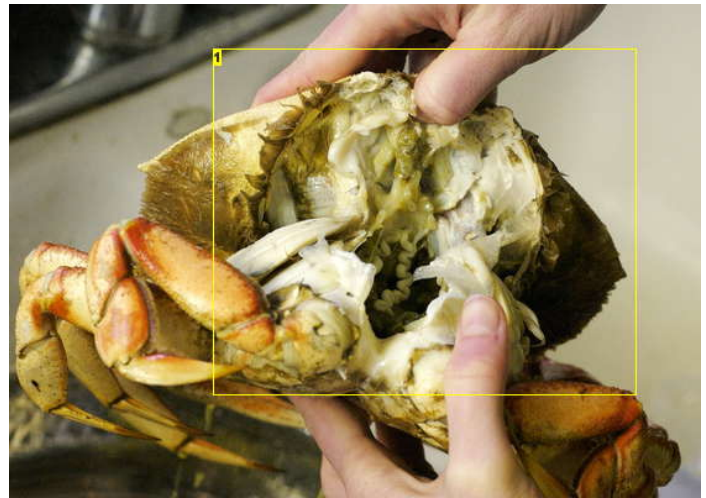


Image Notes

1. Lift and separate. Look at all those guts!



Image Notes
1. Fully detached.

step 6: Remove gills

Remove and discard the spongy, inedible gills from either side of the body.



Image Notes
1. Gills != tasty.

step 7: Remove mandibles

The mandibles are the mouthparts at the front of the crab. Crack them off and toss them out.

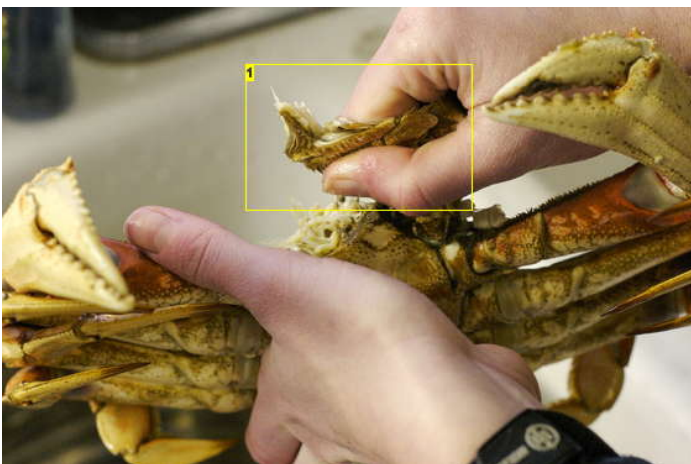


Image Notes

1. The mandibles come off easily.

step 8: Rinse clean

Rinse all of the greenish-brown goo out of the body; the only things left should be shell and tasty meat.

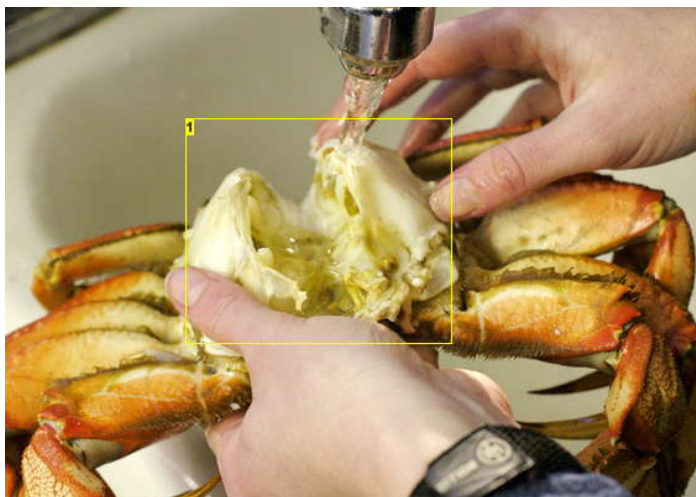


Image Notes

1. Clean all the guts out.

step 9: Break in half

Turn the crab upside down, grip it on either side, and place your thumbs near the midline on the back (where the carapace used to be.) Push up with your thumbs and pull down with your hands; the crab should crack easily and cleanly along its center line (where the apron used to lie.)

Pull these pieces fully apart.



Image Notes

1. Cracking straight down the centerline.



step 10: Serve

Half-crabs look nice for serving, and are a decent single-person serving if you've got some side dishes. If you've got a ton of crabs from your traps, though, why bother eating anything else?

Serve with a lemon wedge, and keep a cracker (or large knife, or slab of wood and a smashing rock) available for claw access.

Pull all of the nice large chunks of meat out of the body, then break open the legs and claws. You can pick the meat out with a tool, or forgo decorum and simply slurp it out directly. There's really no way to eat crabs delicately, so don't bother trying.



step 11: Extras

- 1) Use the last leg segment (the crab foot/toe) to pick meat out of the legs and body. It works just as well as those special forks and picks they'd like to sell you.
- 2) Sauce is really unnecessary if you've got good fresh crabs; a bit of fresh lemon is plenty for flavoring. If you've got extra, and end up picking and refrigerating the meat, this is more likely to need extra flavoring. The extra meat is good with garlic butter, fresh garlicky mayonnaise or a garlicky Caesar-style dressing, or with a lemon/garlic/olive oil mixture; put it on a slice of fresh bread for good measure. Crab cakes are always good, just don't dilute your good crab meat with too much buttery breadcrumby stuff.
- 3) If you've got the freezer space, tuck the shell pieces away for seafood stock. A pot full of fish trimmings, crab and shrimp shells, hopefully with a bit of meat stuck to the insides, will make a great base for seafood chowders. Just be sure you don't include any gills or guts.

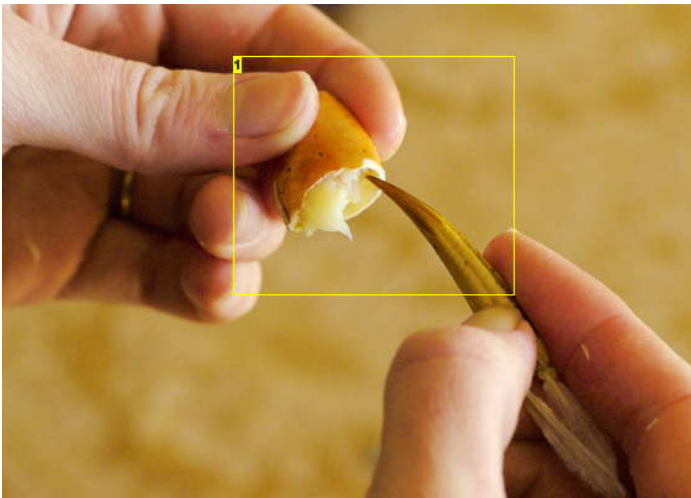


Image Notes

1. Use a crab toe to get at those hard-to-reach spots.

Related Instructables



Quick Crab Cakes by RealSimple.com



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Comments

49 comments [Add Comment](#)



Czyne says:

Sep 28, 2008. 11:17 PM [REPLY](#)

Nice instructions, I've cleaned countless dungeness crabs this way.

I may have overlooked it if you gave instructions to the vivisection bit, but the easiest way I know of is to put your crabs into the fridge for a while to make them go into 'hibernation' mode- they become quite sluggish. Also good if you don't want them crawling about while you're trying to throw them in the pot if you choose to boil them alive instead.

After they're chilled and on the counter, flip them onto their backs and lift up/hold back the 'apron' with your knife, placing the blade point at the narrowest part where the apron normally sits against the middle of their bodies, then stab downwards vertically, as if you're slicing them from head to toe. Rock your knife back and forth some for good measure until the twitching stops, then clean, cook and enjoy.



cheeterrr says:

Jul 16, 2008. 6:26 PM [REPLY](#)

This is great, I have never given a second look to them at the store. I didn't know how to prep them at all. I love crab but normally it's all done and I just heat and eat. Now I can try fresh crab at home. Thanks!



nature223 says:

Jun 4, 2008. 3:04 PM [REPLY](#)

as a mid atlantic guy I have an addendum...

STEAM....never boil.

we do it this way...

easy...

ONE CAN....BEER(any works)

ONE CAN...VINEGAR(add to the now emptied can,add)

copious amounts of ANY seasoning salt,turn them the color of the salt(wash off later as desired..I do)

Cover and wait for wisps of steam to escape from under lid, about 10 minutes. Continue cooking over high heat for an additional 20-30 minutes until crabs turn red and meat is white.

that's it the meat'll be firm and NOT soggy like boiled ones...also we have BLUE CRABS.

taste difference is pretty much like steak versus hamburgers....one is close..but not quite.

also FEMALES are alot sweeter and alot of East Coaster's dont LIKE females for that reason.

your's still was pretty excellent instructable for a dungeness guy(nudge nudge)...running east coast west coast joke BTW.

the way you showed how to eat was dead on..I kinda like the claws best though.



dianneyiisan says:

Apr 26, 2008. 12:48 AM [REPLY](#)

I want to say thank you SO much for the photographs that are clear. I boiled a couple of crabbies for my mother-in-law who doesn't speak english and me, and all I had to do was point to the photo. Not to mention, I had some learning to do myself!

Thanks again!

You should do one on lobsters, as I am planning on going to the market for lobsters later and again have no clue.



canida says:

Apr 27, 2008. 10:56 AM [REPLY](#)

Awesome! I'm glad it was helpful.

I don't have access to lobsters right now, but it's not a particularly different operation. The legs and claws work pretty much like a crab's, except that the shell may be a bit harder.

To get at the tail meat, first place the lobster on its stomach. Grab the tail section (abdomen) with one hand and the body (cephalothorax) with the other, and twist them apart. Clean out any bits of gut stuck to the tail meat (unless you like that type of thing) and dispose of the head or save it for stock.

Now take the tail section, and squeeze the hard back shell so the edges almost touch across the belly - the thinner shell on the belly will fold and crack down the middle. Now put your fingers under the edges to pull the hard shell apart again, and the belly shell will split open, making it easy to remove the tail meat. Does that make sense?



electrophobia says:

Apr 14, 2008. 8:40 AM [REPLY](#)

A living animal killed by boiling. Is this ethic for you? I mean u can kill it faster. This crab has a live. It also can feel the pain like us. Of course we will eat meat by killing but is it true that making them suffer a long time? I don't know... Which is more painful? Cut in half or boil... If someone would like to eat me, please cut my head first to make me suffer less. Or you can anesthetize me first. Thanks!...



aliceowns00 says:

Feb 26, 2008. 4:47 PM [REPLY](#)

haha yeah we caught some crabs one night and we went to cook them, my brother forgot a lid and all of a sudden we had 4 crabs crawling around the house... ahhh good times... nice instructable.



krash63 says:

Nov 28, 2007. 7:26 PM [REPLY](#)

OK, practical question. Do you have to purge the crabs? Like crawfish? Help me...I'm a transplant to this new paradise.



canida says:

Nov 29, 2007. 12:42 PM [REPLY](#)

What do you mean by purging?



krash63 says:

Nov 30, 2007. 6:14 AM [REPLY](#)

When we do crawfish, we dunk them in salt water briefly to "flush them out". Improves the taste, makes it much cleaner tasting.

Doesn't sound like anything similar is done with the crabs. From this outline, looks like we should clean them after their cook.



Tobita says:

Feb 10, 2008. 4:03 PM [REPLY](#)

i always cook my crustaceans in saltwater before boiling in clean water



canida says:

Nov 30, 2007. 7:46 AM [REPLY](#)

I think it's because crawfish tend to get a bit muddy, and you're just removing the much and other stuff that would contaminate the cook water.

With Dungeness crabs it's usually just a question of guts, which many people think improves the flavor in cooking, so cleaning before or after is your choice.

Blue crabs can be a bit mucky if you catch them in a marsh, but we always just gave them a quick hose-off to remove any external dirt. I haven't ever seen anyone pre-clean blue crabs before cooking them, probably since they're so much smaller.

Of course, now that they've re-opened crab season out here in the SF bay area we'll have to figure out whether there's a good way to purge residual oil from the Dungeness crabs.



krash63 says:

Nov 30, 2007. 8:23 AM [REPLY](#)

Thanks. I'm looking forward to my first crab boil in mid January in Half Moon Bay. Hope the oil issue is resolved.



shooby says:

Jan 20, 2008. 1:45 PM [REPLY](#)

Pretty similar for rock crab I assume, right?



ledzep567 says:

Jan 2, 2008. 6:19 PM [REPLY](#)

oh my gosh dungeness crab is the best crab ever!(but only fresh...)
i used to live in washington state. but now i live in north carolina.

great instructable by the way



chickenliver123 says:

Dec 9, 2007. 4:19 PM [REPLY](#)

boil the crab on high for 13 min. it's goooooooooooooooooooooo



freedomii says:

Sep 6, 2007. 7:29 PM [REPLY](#)

They are infinitely better and soooo much cleaner if you break them in half and clean them, and then just cook the legs with attached shoulders... less mess, takes less space in the pot and you are not dealing with any of the inedible goop!



canida says:

Nov 29, 2007. 3:20 PM [REPLY](#)

I did this last time, and it worked quite well!

While it meant I could get all four crabs into the pot at once, my guests were completely freaked out by the crab vivisection, and were almost put off their dinner. Not sure how that's much worse than boiling/steaming the little guys alive, but they found it less appealing.



shark_ef says:

Apr 18, 2007. 2:06 PM [REPLY](#)

hey, you mentioned s carolina low country, got any tricks and tips for someone who is penninsula (charelston) stuck and wants to go crabbing, i've got some stuff, but haven't had any luck



canida says:

Nov 29, 2007. 3:19 PM [REPLY](#)

Have you got a crab trap? Setting your trap out in the middle of a marsh is the easy way to go. Make sure you get a nice big box trap, and load it up with random chicken back/neck/etc parts.

Hand-crabbing with a piece of chicken on a string and a dip net is fun, but results in far fewer crabs for dinner. :)



lemonie says:

Jan 28, 2007. 2:23 PM [REPLY](#)

This only caught my attention because (in the UK) there's a nuclear power plant at Dungeness. The crab pictured is dissapointingly free of mutations...



jongscx says:

Nov 26, 2007. 9:22 AM [REPLY](#)

I heard somewhere that sea-side power plants are good places to fish/crab because the hot water they vent into the sea attracts wildlife...



Vendigroth says:

Nov 13, 2007. 1:10 PM [REPLY](#)

Far too few eyes, for my taste.



John Smith says:

Aug 7, 2007. 4:25 PM [REPLY](#)

Funny, we just went scalloping off the west coast of Florida (Crystal River/Homosassas), and were in the midst of a large nuclear power plant. It's too bad we didn't see any mutants, because that could have been cool. Actually, they catch Blue crab there too.



Nasreen says:

Sep 23, 2007. 2:22 AM [REPLY](#)

These instructions were awesome. It made our meal much easier and useful as well.



canida says:

Sep 27, 2007. 4:27 PM [REPLY](#)

Great- I'm so glad to have been able to help!



teqsun.com says:

Sep 25, 2007. 12:03 PM [REPLY](#)

Wow! Do you know if you can catch dungeoness in so-cal? I live in longbeach and wouldnt mind getting a boat to go crabbing on.



chuckr44 says:

Jan 19, 2007. 1:26 PM [REPLY](#)

A guy in New York state asked a question (on an aquarium board) what kind of crab he found 200 miles from the sea, in a freshwater river. They were blue crabs. Apparently they go 200 miles upstream each year, perhaps for mating.



Cyrus says:

Aug 20, 2007. 1:49 AM [REPLY](#)

I actually worked in a campus lab where they were studying how the protines change in the crabs as they travel upstream. I was responsible for adjusting the salinity of each tank and feeding the little bastards :)



canida says:

Jan 19, 2007. 4:29 PM [REPLY](#)

Cool; I didn't know that.

A fisherman caught a Dungeness crab off the cost of Massachusetts last summer. It was a large male, so they're hoping he was escaped/released dinner instead of the sign of a breeding population.



Ferrite says:

Jul 12, 2007. 3:08 PM [REPLY](#)

For seasoning, dumping some OleBay into the boiling water and it tastes amazing.



Shark500 says:

Mar 15, 2007. 10:14 PM [REPLY](#)

where you said "Gills != nasty"

!= means doesn't equal (in most programming languages)

unless you didn't mean it like that at all. ... now i feel like kind of a dick..



canida says:

Mar 15, 2007. 10:36 PM [REPLY](#)

I actually used it exactly like that- but you misread the final word. It's "Gills != tasty"

Thanks, though! I always appreciate checks on my Instructables, as it's impossible to catch every error.



SnowFire says:

Jan 21, 2007. 10:33 PM [REPLY](#)

The blue crab is common in the Gulf of Mexico. We catch buckets of them with nothing but a flashlight and a small fishnet in the shallow waters at night.

A friend and myself went to a Chinese restaurant in Vancouver last November and they had live Dungeness Crabs on the menu. That recipe is not that hard and tastes really good, way better than boiled if you ask me.

You need cornstarch, lots of Garlic sliced in thin slices and crushed cayenne peppers.

You do need a fryer, or at least a pot where the oil can get deep enough so that it covers the crab parts.

I know for a fact that in those places they have rubber bands around the claws of the crab, which makes opening said crabs while alive much easier. Which brings us to the next part: It is the same procedure as above for cleaning, but you have to have the crab cleaned up before you fry it, because for one part you need to break it in half then remove the large claws so it fits in your fryer (unless you have a large fryer, then I would say its an easier task) and second is we want to make sure the crab gets battered without the guts and the gills for better flavor.

Make sure you rinse out the guts off the crab, and while it is still wet, apply the "batter". In a bowl, have the cornstarch with the cayenne peppers and thin slices of garlic mixed up. I would say a cup of cornstarch should be enough with maybe 1/4 of the peppers and maybe the same amount of garlic. This of course all depends on how strong you want your crab to taste. (These measurements can batter 2 crabs I approximately)

Make sure your oil is hot enough, then dump in the parts and fry your crab for at least 6 to 7 minutes (a rule of thumb is that if the crab begins to float in the oil then it's done).

Wait a couple minutes before serving to make sure it cools down a bit.

Break out the lemons and the nutcrackers, it's time for dinner ;)



ficklepixel says:

Jan 20, 2007. 12:14 PM [REPLY](#)

Careful about catching Dungeness in the Bay. Because San Francisco Bay is a breeding area, all Dungeness of any size must be thrown back. Not doing so can earn you a fine of upwards of \$500



Ibanezfoo says:

Jan 21, 2007. 9:27 PM [REPLY](#)

Ah good ol' freedom. A long lost dream in the U.S.



Mech says:

Jan 18, 2007. 5:46 PM [REPLY](#)

Dude...in this step, you're rinsing out the crab mustard! That stuff makes half the taste!



canida says:

Jan 18, 2007. 6:06 PM [REPLY](#)

Yeah, but it's an *acquired* taste. People who need crab-cooking instructions definitely won't like it. :-)



spinach_dip says:

Jan 17, 2007. 6:02 PM [REPLY](#)

first time I've ever seen **one** crab steamed. We do half a bushel of blue crabs at a time. We always steam them with a mixture of water, vinegar, and beer, and cover the crabs themselves with Old Bay. Can you guess the area I'm from?

Man, you got 'em big on the left coast.



canida says:

Jan 17, 2007. 9:49 PM [REPLY](#)

Probably somewhere on the Chesapeake Bay. Close?



spinach_dip says:

Jan 18, 2007. 11:12 AM [REPLY](#)

yep



crapflinger says:

Jan 17, 2007. 3:58 PM [REPLY](#)

i'm from southern louisiana...so i'm used to your normal blue crab...but we boil (pronounced "bahwl") the snot out of them with all kinds of great seasoning and goodness (zataran's crab boil) MUCH better than steamed with butter or any of that jazz...

on the dungeness crab note..."we" used to go to oregon (ashland...if you've never been...go) every summer to visit friends...and one year we spent a few days on the coast at a place called seal rock..or elephant rock...or something like that...and we went out and got about 2 dozen (the guy at the dock took at least 10 minutes to regain composure when we bought them) of these behemoths of crustaciana and boiled them up cajun style...i ate about 4 of them...they are officially awesome crabbies



canida says:

Jan 17, 2007. 4:31 PM [REPLY](#)

I spent chunks of each childhood summer catching and eating blue crabs in the South Carolina low country, so was ecstatic to discover how much easier it was to pick Dungeness crabs. Given the opportunity, I'll eat myself sick then continue to sit and happily pick crabs until my fingers bleed. With Dungeness crabs this results in a MUCH larger pile of meat.

We always boiled blue crabs as well, but with a milder seasoning than Zataran's because we're not from the proper part of the world. Zataran's is certainly the good stuff, though.



crapflinger says:
indeed...you can eat those dungeness guys with a shovel instead of a toothpick

Jan 18, 2007. 7:34 AM [REPLY](#)



trebuchet03 says:
Yeah... you pacific coastians are lucky when it comes to most varieties of fresh crab :P
I guess I'll have to settle with my warm water lobster and conch :P

Jan 17, 2007. 2:46 PM [REPLY](#)

I like the meat pick in step 11 - awesome idea :)



canida says:
We just had stone crabs in Florida over the holidays, so I have no sympathy for your "only lobster and conch" protests! Stone crabs are really good.

Jan 17, 2007. 3:54 PM [REPLY](#)



trebuchet03 says:
hehe :) You caught me :P

Jan 17, 2007. 6:55 PM [REPLY](#)



Crash2108 says:
Mmm, dunginess...

Jan 17, 2007. 6:31 PM [REPLY](#)



leevonk says:
if you ever mess up on one of your taxidermy projects you can give it to the dungeness crabs you have. they'll pick the skeleton clean, then you're left with a nice clean skeleton. This is according to the book 'stiff' that I got for christmas.

Jan 17, 2007. 5:36 PM [REPLY](#)

(http://www.amazon.com/Stiff-Curious-Lives-Human-Cadavers/dp/0393324826/sr=8-1/qid=1169077024/ref=pd_bbs_1/102-7783616-1096912?ie=UTF8&s=books)