

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Thu, Oct. 25, 2007

Crab? Sure. Local? No.

Imports pinch Maryland's pride

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STEVENSVILLE, Md. - It is deepest October on Chesapeake Bay, peak crab-picking season, the blue crabs coming in thick and fast and, blessedly, fat after an erratic summer and drought that sent them skittering up-bay, away from encroaching salt water to refuges in the Sassafras River, and the Elk.

But the hubbub in the handful of crab houses that are left on the Eastern Shore - the Mexican pickers picking jumbo lump, the machines shaking out the flaked meat - is a bit of a seasonal charade: Long-term, the crab outlook is as murky as ever.

It has spawned panicky, last-minute loopholes to post-9/11 guest-worker rules, and nose-holding deals by old-line crab houses to distribute (under the most venerable names on the bay) imported Indonesian product, and shifting, hardly chauvinistic allegiances.

Drop by It's the Pit's, the barbecue and seafood carryout and caterer where a kettle of lush corn-crab chowder is simmering for lunch, and the containers of fresh, lump crab meat are from North Carolina; the claw meat, from Venezuela.

A few miles east on Route 50 in the windowed dining room of the Narrows overlooking the bay, the tasty (if slightly heavy) baked crabcakes are made from crab that never dipped a claw in the bay: It's up from Louisiana.

In fact, not until I duck down quiet, residential State Street do I encounter the real McCoy at a tidy, backyard operation called Mr. B's Seafood: Some of the sweetest, plumpest local crab on the bay is steaming in 50-gallon drums, and the refrigerated case offers tubs of rich, ivory-colored, Chesapeake jumbo, picked about an hour south of here on Fishing Creek.

The price, though, is a jaw-dropping \$30 a pound, close to \$6 more you pay for the imported stuff.

And therein lies the story - or a large part of it - of how a regional delicacy called Maryland blue crab has become, even in its own backyard, a niche product.



The blue crab, unlike the homebody oyster that shares its Chesapeake digs, has itchy feet, ducking in and out of shallow feeder rivers, high-tailing it north, as we said, when drought turns the bay's mouth too salty for its taste.

So in the most cosmic of views, it should not seem unnatural that crabbing, too, once the heartbeat of Maryland's coast, is regularly reshaped by life-cycle and migration.

But a more prosaic view unfolds beyond this village at the eastern foot of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Marinas and condo projects command waterfront once bobbing with skipjacks and crab houses.

The last crab houses standing tend to be an hour south on the Choptank River at Cambridge, Md., home among others to J.M. Clayton Co. (circa 1890), the oldest crab-meat processor on the bay.

As harvests faltered, Maryland's regulations tightened: Five years ago, shipping in egg-bearing females from nearby states was curtailed, and minimum legal size limits were increased (from five to five-and-a-quarter inches). Maryland crab houses complained they were suddenly paying twice as much a bushel as competitors in Virginia and North Carolina.

And as prices rose, Southeast Asian and South American imports rushed in: Soon, offshore crab meat - usually pasteurized and canned, and preserved with sodium acid pyrophosphate (which also acts as a whitening agent) - had cornered two-thirds of the U.S. market.

Crabbing fleets shrank. So did the supply of seasonal crab pickers, many of them aging African-American women whose probable replacements were finding cleaner, year-round work - in big-box stores, in health care, and in the resorts going up where docks once stood.

Some slack was taken up by the automated "Quick Pik" crab-picker that Clayton patented in the 1970s. But premium lump must still be picked by hand; for the last 10 years, by guest workers from Mexico, whose piecework wages spike this time of year, but can average a modest \$300 a week for the entire April-November season.

The federal so-called H-2B visa window was almost shut on even these workers, though last week they were granted a reprieve - the right to come back at least one more year.



Unable to beat the cheaper Asian crab (which he finds inferior to the Maryland homeboy), Jack Brooks, whose family has run Clayton for generations, has joined forces with it: He now distributes it under the family's "Clayton" label.

His premium Chesapeake crab is sold as "Epicure," and one reliable customer is the 400-room Hyatt resort nearby that, in a bittersweet twist, offers work to women who might otherwise be picking crabs.

The chains (Acme Markets, among them) that once bought his fresh lump now stock tins of pasteurized Indonesian crab instead, as low as \$17.99 a pound.

If you did want fresh jumbo-lump crab, of course, you could still find it last week on ice at the Reading Terminal Market.

It was imported - like the crab pickers on the Eastern Shore - from Mexico.