

Coveted Crawfish Dishes

MARY FONSECA



Crawfish and Corn Soup, See recipe on page 35.

According to the old adage, “You can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear,” fine products cannot be fashioned from crude materials. However, there are some “exceptions that make the rule.” One is surely the **humble crawfish**. This ungainly creature lives in a hole, walks backward when alarmed, and is stuck with the uncomplimentary nickname, **“mudbug.”** However, “crawfish lovers have included Emperor Maximilian I of Austria in the fifteenth century, **Queen Elizabeth I** of England in the sixteenth century, and Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte of France in the eighteenth century,” relates Glen Pitre in his well researched tome, *The Crawfish Book*.

Crawfish enjoyed by European heads of state in past centuries were not, of course, the “high class” mudbugs found in Louisiana waters, and eventually also farmed in ponds. These were first harvested by Native Americans. “They used to bait reeds with venison, stick them in the water and periodically pick up the reeds with crawfish attached to the bait,” say Kenneth Delcambre, Jim Bradshaw, Jimmy Avery, and Dwight Landreneau, creators of “Crawfish 101” on www.BreauxBridgeLive.com. Nets replaced reeds in the 1930s and, by the 1950s, crawfish traps, still in use today, were invented.

The lowly crawfish climbs the social ladder

Acadian refugees, who became known as Cajuns, arrived in Louisiana in the early years of the 18th century and quickly learned to value Louisiana’s mudbugs. Nowadays, crawfish are so associated with Acadiana’s famed cuisine that the words “Cajun” and “crawfish” pair as naturally as red beans and rice. But at first, “Eating crawfish was a sure sign you were poor,” says Dickie Breaux, in an interview by Mary Tutwiler for Lafayette’s *Independent Weekly*. “I’d eat boiled crawfish at my

grandmother's house, often. If there was a knock on the door, she'd gather up the crawfish and throw them away rather than be seen eating crawfish."

Several sources say that Louisiana crawfish were first served as a restaurant entree in the 1920s, when Mrs. Charles Hebert, and her daughters Yolie and Marie, served them to guests at their Hebert Hotel in Breaux Bridge. "One dish on the Sunday lunch was made of butter, onions, pepper, crawfish fat and tails, which the sisters called crawfish courtbouillon," recalls Breaux, owner of Breaux Bridge's Café des Amis.

The Heberts shared their crawfish courtbouillon recipe with Aline Guidry Champagne, proprietor of The Rendezvous, a local restaurant, bar and dance hall. One day, Aline was cooking crawfish courtbouillon when Martin Begnaud, a Breaux Bridge banker, stuck his head in the kitchen and asked in French what she was doing, relates Breaux. "J'étouffée les écrevisse," ("I'm smothering some crawfish,") she replied, and gave him a taste. Begnaud came back the following week with his employees and ordered crawfish étouffée.

When crawfish étouffée was included on The Rendezvous' menu, the lowly mudbug started to gain a little respect. Several restaurants in the Lafayette area began serving crawfish, and some, such as the Yellow Bowl, the oldest continually operating restaurant in Acadiana, introduced their own innovations, reports Tutwiler in *Independent Weekly*. Tony Roberts bought the still-thriving Jeanerette eatery in 1953 and was the first to come up with the idea of frying crawfish. He dipped the tails in pancake batter and dropped them into hot oil in a deep-fat fryer.

Getting creative with crawfish

Crawfish dishes are now featured in Louisiana restaurants ranging from neighborhood sandwich shops to the "grande dames" in New Orleans' French Quarter. They are also served in many of the world's finest restaurants.

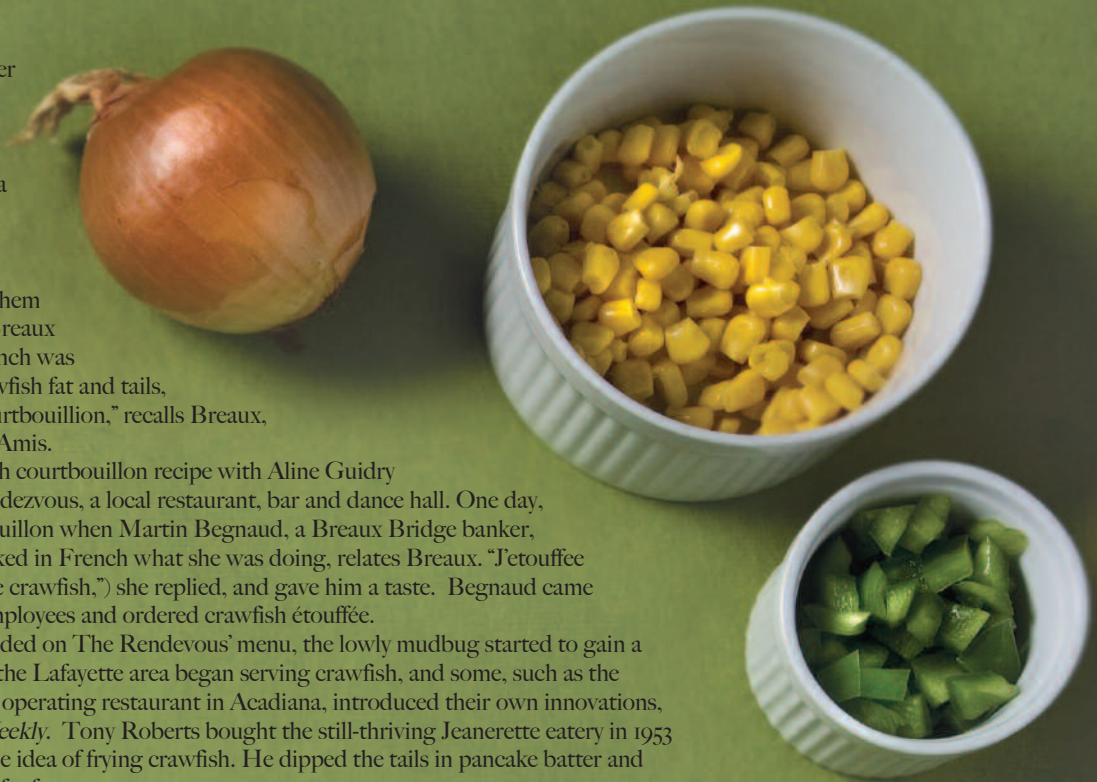
Creative chefs continue to explore the versatility of the crustaceans, using them in sublime recipes such as crawfish with fried green tomatoes, served at the Palace Café in New Orleans. "This appetizer is a real crowd-pleaser," says the Palace Café's Lee Ann Garner. The Canal Street restaurant features crawfish with fried green tomatoes on seasonal menus, and the chefs frequently prepare it for charity functions.

At Café Vermilionville in Lafayette, patrons enjoy the novelty of eating crawfish beignets in a landmark structure that opened as the area's first inn in 1818. This appealing starter, created by chef/owner Ken Veron, is a tasty blend of mirepoix (a mixture of diced carrots, onions and celery), cheeses, and deep-fried crawfish tails served with a spicy Creole mustard sauce.

In honor of the mudbug

Great crawfish eating can also be enjoyed at several Louisiana festivals. The oldest, and largest, is the annual festival held in Breaux Bridge, where crawfish first jumped out of the boiling pot and landed in the Hebert family's crawfish courtbouillon. "In 1959, when our town celebrated its centennial, the Louisiana legislature officially designated Breaux Bridge as "the crawfish capital of the world," says Mark Bernard, board member and events coordinator for the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival Association. "Since then, the Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival Association has hosted an annual crawfish festival where folks can enjoy crawfish cooked almost any way you can imagine, plus Cajun and zydeco music, craft booths, folklore exhibitions and carnival rides." The Breaux Bridge festival, held the first weekend in May in the community's Parc Hardy, also sponsors a crawfish étouffée cook-off in honor of the crawfish and rice combination spawned in Breaux Bridge. "We usually have about 25 amateur cooks in our contest," says Bernard, "and the first-place winner becomes one of the judges at the following year's festival."

Both professional and amateur chefs compete in the World Championship Crawfish Étouffée Cook-off in nearby Eunice. They arrive with special ingredients to stir into their pots, each hoping to have the recipe for becoming champion of the city of Eunice's 20-year-old contest. A whole lot of cooking, as well as spirited music and dancing, take place under the huge pavilion in Eunice's Northwest Community Center on the last Sunday in March (the third Sunday if Easter falls on the last Sunday). After the official judging, hungry festival-goers purchase tasting portions from cook-off contestants.



Breaux Bridge, “crawfish capital of the world” holds its annual Crawfish Festival the first weekend in May. Enjoy cook-offs, Cajun and Zydeco music and lots of good food.



Photo provided by Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival.

The popularity of crawfish events isn't confined to Acadiana, however; it extends to every area of Louisiana. Contenders in the annual Odyssey House Crawfish Cook-off are professional chefs from New Orleans area restaurants. “We encourage contestants to develop new recipes,” says Vincent Williams, coordinator of the competition held every April at a downtown New Orleans hotel, “and the chefs never disappoint us.” Last year, about 400 people attended the event, which benefits Odyssey House’s residential and out-patient drug abuse programs.

In St. Bernard, near the state’s lower coast, enthusiasts gather for the Louisiana Crawfish Festival, sponsored by the Knights of Columbus, to support the organization’s charitable endeavors. “Our festival starts on the last Thursday in March at the Frederick J. Sigur Civic Center,” says Darryl Barrios, chairman of this year’s 30th anniversary festival. There will be something for everyone to enjoy. Visitors can sample more than 25 different crawfish dishes, plus other seafood and barbecue specialties, and enjoy 60 amusement rides, 40 game booths, live music, arts and crafts, and, of course, our world-famous crawfish races.”

Mudbug madness made its way to north Louisiana in 1984, when a group of daring citizens, tired of being told “you people in Shreveport are more like Texans,” organized a crawfish boil. “This group wanted to make their crawfish boil the granddaddy of them all,” says Melanie Bacon of Downtown Shreveport Unlimited. “The gathering was so popular it eventually grew into our Memorial Day Weekend Mudbug Madness Festival.”

During the four-day celebration at Shreveport’s downtown Festival Plaza, a lively mélange of food, music and fun for all ages is offered. “We have several different kinds of music — blues, jazz, Cajun, zydeco —




Photographed by K.C. Stephens.



Shreveport’s four-day Memorial Day Weekend Mudbug Madness Festival offers crawfish cooked in every conceivable way — including boiled, of course.

plus a 5K race, dancing and crawfish-eating contests, and special activities for children,” says Bacon. “We prepare a huge amount of boiled crawfish, but visitors will also find several booths offering mouth-watering crawfish treats and a variety of other enticing foods.”

Crawfish Monica, possibly the most famous crawfish recipe ever created, is a culinary star of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. During the celebration, held on the last weekend in April and the first weekend in May, folks line up early to buy the popular dish, created by Pierre Hilzlim, founder of Kajun Kettle, and named for his wife and business partner, Monica. The company describes their signature dish as “a delectable blend of tender crawfish tails in a rich, spicy cream sauce served over premium quality rotini.”

That backward-walking critter, the Louisiana crawfish, has come a long way! 

Mary Fonseca is the author of *Weekend Getaways in Louisiana* and *Louisiana Gardens*. Visit Mary’s Web site: <http://members.cox.net/mryfon>.



Crawfish and Corn Soup

Louisiana Crawfish: Heads & Tails Above the Rest!
Louisiana Crawfish Promotion & Research Board

MAKES 6 SERVINGS.

3 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons bell pepper, chopped
2 tablespoons celery, chopped
1 teaspoon garlic, chopped
2 tablespoons onion, chopped
1 pound Louisiana crawfish tail meat
1 can cream-style corn (10 ounces)
1 can whole-kernel corn (10 ounces)
1 1/2 cups water
1/2 teaspoon red pepper
1 pint half-and-half

Sauté vegetables in butter until tender. Add crawfish and cook 2 minutes. Add all other ingredients except half-and-half and simmer 5 minutes. Add half-and-half and heat through, but do not boil.

Pair With

A Chateau Saint Michelle Gewürztraminer has a touch of soft spice to make the red pepper-laced soup more palatable.

The Original Étouffée

The Crawfish Book by Glen Pitre
Aline Champagne

MAKES 2 SERVINGS.

1 cup onion, chopped
2 tablespoons oil
1/4 cup water
1 cup crawfish tail meat with fat
1 rounded tablespoon flour
Paprika, salt, red and black pepper, to taste
Parsley and green onion, chopped for garnish

Sauté onion in oil until golden and tender. Add water and tails with fat. Simmer for 15 to 20 minutes. Thicken with flour, add seasonings to taste. Serve over rice. Garnish with parsley and green onion.

Pair With

Pinot Gris by Benton Lane has just enough fruit to handle the crawfish.



Crawfish Bread

Crawfish Bread

Adapted from The Encyclopedia of Cajun and Creole Cuisine
Chef John Folse

MAKES 4 TO 5 SERVINGS.

2 cups peeled crawfish tails
1 loaf French bread
1/2 stick butter
1/2 cup diced onions
1/2 cup diced celery
1/4 cup diced red bell peppers
1 tablespoon minced garlic
1/2 teaspoon dry mustard
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1/3 cup mozzarella cheese
1/3 cup Cheddar cheese

Slice French bread in half lengthwise and scoop out the inside of the loaf. Set aside. In a large skillet, melt butter over medium-high heat. Sauté crawfish, onions, celery, bell peppers and garlic 15 minutes. Blend in dry mustard and mayonnaise. Add cheeses and blend until melted. Spread crawfish mixture inside the bread then put halves back together. Butter the top of the loaf, wrap it in foil and bake on a barbecue pit or in a 350°F oven for 20 to 30 minutes. Cut bread into slices and serve hot.

Pair With

An Italian white wine like Lacryma Christi Bianco by Mastroberando matches this delicious cheese and crawfish filled bread.

Crawfish Pasta

Louisiana Crawfish Company
www.LACrawfish.com

Note: If you don't have crawfish available in your area, this recipe works well with shrimp, oysters or lump crabmeat. Just replace the crawfish with one pound of your seafood of choice.

MAKES 4 TO 6 SERVINGS.

- 1 pound fresh pasta (rotelle is preferred, but use your favorite shape)
- 1 stick butter (do not use margarine)
- 1/2 cup chopped onions
- 3 to 10 cloves garlic, chopped (to your taste)
- 1 pound crawfish tails, boiled and peeled
- 1 pint half-and-half
- 1 to 2 tablespoons Creole seasoning

Cook pasta according to the directions on the package. Drain, then rinse under cool water. Drain again, thoroughly. Melt the butter in a large pot and sauté onions and garlic for 3 minutes. Add the seafood and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the half-and-half, then add several big pinches of Creole seasoning, tasting before the next pinch until you think it's right. Cook for 5 to 10 minutes over medium heat until the sauce thickens. Add the pasta and toss well. Let it sit for 10 minutes or so over very low heat, stirring often. Serve immediately with hot French bread.

Pair With

Santa Christina Sangiovese by Antinori – A light Italian to foil the rich cheese sauce.



Crawfish Pasta



Crawfish with Fried Green Tomatoes

*Dickie Brennan's Palace Café
Palace Café: The Flavor of New Orleans
Dickie Brennan with Leslie Brennan and Gus Martin*

MAKES 4 SERVINGS.

Crawfish:

- 1 cup heavy whipping cream
- 1 teaspoon garlic, chopped
- 2 ounces tasso, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon butter
- 1/4 cup mixed green, red and yellow bell peppers, finely chopped
- 1/4 cup half-moon leek slices
- 1 teaspoon Creole seasoning
- 8 ounces crawfish tails
- 2 tablespoons brandy
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme, chopped
- 1/2 cup green onions, chopped
- 1 teaspoon butter, chilled

Fried Green Tomatoes:

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 to 2 teaspoons Creole seasoning
- 1 egg
- 1 cup milk
- 1 cup seasoned bread crumbs
- 2 large green tomatoes
- Vegetable oil for frying

Garnish:

- 4 sprigs of fresh thyme
- 4 boiled crawfish (optional)

Creole Seasoning:

- 1/2 cup salt
- 1/4 cup granulated garlic
- 1/4 cup granulated onion
- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 4 teaspoons cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

For the Creole seasoning, combine the salt, granulated garlic, granulated onion, paprika, cayenne pepper and black pepper in a small bowl and mix well. Spoon into an airtight storage container. Makes 1 1/4 cups.

For the crawfish, cook the cream in a small saucepan over medium heat until reduced by half. Sauté the garlic and tasso in 1 teaspoon butter in a large saucepan over medium heat until the tasso begins to brown. Add the bell peppers, leeks and Creole seasoning. Sauté until the vegetables are tender-crisp.

Add the crawfish tails and brandy. Ignite the brandy and allow the flames to subside. Stir in the reduced cream, thyme and green onions. Reduce the heat and add the chilled butter, whisking constantly until thickened. Keep warm over low heat.

For the tomatoes, mix the flour with the Creole seasoning in a bowl. Whisk the egg and milk in a bowl. Pour the bread crumbs into a bowl. Cut each tomato into 1/2-inch thick slices, discarding the end pieces. Coat the slices with the seasoned flour. Dip in the egg wash and press into the bread crumbs to coat evenly.

Heat the vegetable oil in a skillet and add the tomato slices. Fry until golden brown on both sides. Drain on paper towels.

To serve, place a slice of green tomato in the center of each of 4 serving plates. Spoon the crawfish sauce over the slices and top with the remaining slices. Garnish with a sprig of fresh thyme and a boiled crawfish.

Pair With

Try Schloss Vollrads Kabinett – a huge wine for a fusion of Creole flavors.