

TIME TO GO A LITTLE CRAB CRAZY!



PHOTO BY LEIGH CORT

Steamed crabs in Manteo, North Carolina

story by LEIGH CORT

When the summer sun pushes us out of our nest to travel the Southeast barrier islands from St. Augustine to the North Carolina's Outer Banks, my culinary imagination awakens to our "roving season" and a rush of warm crab dip dreams! Quiet docks turn into lively stages for the timeless ritual of fishing and blue crab crabbing ... gatherings of nets, strings and feasting. For me, it's a daily vacation ceremony to discover an unexpected "winner." This has become a summertime gastronomic adventure that always ends with carrying home a little box of recipes, photos and stories about the chefs and servers we have met along the way.

I left home, the car packed with very few garments, great beach sandals and an appetite knowing that I'll be gaining at least five pounds from warm crab dip that begins every dinner along with a regionally inspired beverage. This year, the rich aromas and creative bourbon cocktails seemed to pair beautifully with each bubbly, cheesy, creamy, luscious crab dip ordered. And no matter the restaurant or destination, there wasn't one menu where the crab dip appetizer was missing from each bill o' fare!

From tablecloth fine dining to local fish camps, from hotel 5-star chefs to country cooks, the summer selections were spontaneous and unexpected. Somehow, this road trip began with my childhood images of mother and dad dressed up — the ladies wearing twirly skirts and bouffant hairdos sipping a sloe gin fizz and the gentlemen toasting with scotch and martinis. The celebration always featured a decadent seafood dip prior to the "big event" of Jersey shore seafood indulgences. A good party was all about great conversation and a summertime appetizing bite that I'll never forget. Even the hand-buttered toasted breads rivaled the crab dip!



PHOTOS BY LEIGH CORT

A rabid collector of vintage cookbooks, I still cherish my favorite old recipe binder from mother and her post WWII girlfriends whose calendars were dotted with dinner party notes and keepsake recipes. Coincidentally, there were more entries for pound cakes and "summertime crab dip" than any other categories. I inherited the impulsiveness of cooking but always found inspiration for sherry, rum or bourbon-encouraged excitement. Who doesn't guard their recipes like heirloom antiques? Home cooks might swear by a hot, heavy iron skillet bake or prefer a refreshing chilled blue crab dip with authentic seafood spice like Old Bay, adding the chunks of sweet fresh crab meat at the very end! To me, the secret is balancing a seasoned, rich cream base bubbly from the oven with a mélange of cheeses and sherry!

Back to basics and being crab crazy, one of the great things about catching your own bounty is that you don't need to have a boat if you live on the East Coast. Tie a piece of old raw chicken on a string and walk out onto a dock, pier or any shallow bay (like Shallowbag Bay in the Outer Banks of North Carolina or the marshy roadway out to East Beach on St. Simons Island, Georgia) and there's a good chance a summertime blue claw crab will find it. If you have a giant crab trap that you can fill with a few pieces of smelly old raw chicken, you can toss the entire wire trap into the waters and wait until morning. Imagine the hours ahead after steaming or boiling the crabs and working on taking the prized crabmeat out of the shell. For the faint of heart, contact your local fish market and, believe me, it's worth the price for a 1 lbs. container of fresh lump crabmeat. You'll find that making your crab dip becomes a treasured dish every season — and not just during the summertime.

Exploring the abundance of regional hot crab dip recipes, you might settle on a chilled variety or the simple-to-prepare hot version that will probably create your



PHOTO BY LEIGH CORT

Photo of winning crab dip

READY FOR A RECIPE?

- 1 pound lump crab meat, about 3 cups
- 2 T. butter
- ½ C. finely minced shallots
- 2 cloves minced garlic
- 4 small green onions finely chopped
- ½ C. Mayonnaise (not the sweet brand)
- 2 8-oz. packages cream cheese, room temperature
- 1 t. Old Bay seasoning
- 7 oz. shredded Swiss Cheese, about 2.5 Cups
- 2-3 T. crunchy bread crumbs — or crackers — Panko
- 2 T. finely chopped parsley (garnish)
- OPTIONAL: Add in ¼ C. tiny pieces of chopped cooked shrimp or cooked chopped tiny pieces of bacon (drained)

DIRECTIONS:

- Preheat oven to 400 F.
- Pick through the fresh crabmeat for shells and separate into easy to sprinkle pieces
- Melt the butter in small pan with shallots and garlic. Cook only 2-3 minutes over medium heat. Remove from heat.
- In a large bowl, blend cream cheese, lemon juice and mayonnaise until smooth. Mix in sauteed shallots and green onions, plus Old Bay Seasoning.
- Gently mix in Swiss cheese and lump crab meat.
- Spread in the shallow baking dish and sprinkle with breadcrumbs.
- Bake 25-30 minutes until golden brown.
- Serve crab dip with crackers, crispy baguette, toasted pita bread or your favorite "dipper"!

If crabbing, picking crab or eating crab is a passion, consider hosting a competitive Crab Dip Contest. It might become a family tradition. Or plan a day when you cover a picnic table with brown butcher paper, dump the freshly steamed crabs onto the table, find your little wooden crab or lobster mallets and enjoy the long summer evening with people you love. Bon appetit, y'all!

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DINE

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owned boutiques and galleries, paddling quiet waterways or relaxing at an ocean-front resort before ending the day over an exceptional dinner. With accommodations ranging from luxury beachfront resorts and boutique inns to vacation rentals and family-friendly hotels, extending the getaway comes naturally.

Often called Amelia Island's "secret season," this time of year brings warm days, uncrowded beaches and a gentler rhythm than the busy summer months, creating the perfect backdrop for exploring the island's acclaimed restaurants. Whether celebrating a special occasion, planning a romantic escape or simply taking time away, guests are encouraged to slow the pace, savor every bite and appreciate why Amelia Island continues to earn its reputation as one of Florida's most inviting coastal dining destinations.

Throughout September, guests can extend the spirit of hospitality beyond the table. By scanning a QR code on Dining Month menus at participating restaurants, diners can make a voluntary donation directly to America's Youth and its Interfaith Dinner Network, hosted at the Salvation Army Hope House, helping provide warm meals and



A tasty dessert



Pizza on the hearth

compassionate support to local children and families facing food insecurity.

Participating restaurants, menus and lodging options are available at AmeliaIsland.com/DiningMonth.



A delicious dish



A tranquil evening by the water

This September, Amelia Island Dining Month offers every reason to leave the hurry behind, reserve a table worth remembering and turn a memorable meal into a coastal weekend getaway.

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