

# Endless-Summer Blue Crab

*Bake the day's catch into an aromatic family feast*

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**CHOICE CRUSTACEAN** | Blue crabs have rich, sweet meat that takes well to light seasoning. Dungeness crab can also be used in this recipe.

**BLUE CRAB SEASON IS UNDER WAY** and I couldn't be more excited. I grew up on Long Island, a few miles from the ocean. From April through September, my mother and I had a tradition of weekend crabbing outings. We would wake up early—something I never thought to do on a school day—and head to a local pier such as Babylon Town Dock or Bergen Point. On occasion, my younger sister would join us, but she was usually more interested in playing with friends. I was all about business. On the short ride over, my mother and I would plan our attack, recapping the successful crab spots from our last outing.

The docks served as a spot for older folks in the neighborhood to relax. Some would fish or crab, while others just basked in the sea breeze. I'd come bursting out of the car and get right to work prepping the traps with unappetizing scraps like raw chicken backs and necks, fish heads and bones. I learned to secure the bait tightly in the traps; otherwise the crabs would scamper away with their haul. As for the traps themselves, there were all sorts: triangular ones, box ones and, my favorite, basket-style traps. In addition to being most effective, they were the easiest to prep and pull out of the water.

My mother and I would lay down four to six traps and wait. I was probably the most active person on the dock, pacing back and forth and checking to see which trap would need to be pulled first. I'd say hello to the folks I recognized, fishing net in tow just in case I spotted a wandering crab. These were long days, usually lasting from early in the morning until late in the afternoon. The bounty, small or large, always made it worth it.

“ *We'd toast a loaf of Pullman bread—Wonder Bread back then, a fresh loaf today—to soak up the crab shells' juices.*

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A big catch led to a large family meal, almost always prepared by my mother, with all of our nearby relatives, highlighted by pasta with crab gravy. “Gravy” in this case refers to tomato sauce. If my grandparents joined, we would keep the top shells on because they loved eating crab roe—something that I was disgusted by at the time, but am now fond of. The crab gravy would be served with an undressed pasta, usually spaghetti, though I always asked for angel hair. Finished with a showering of fresh basil and Pecorino cheese, the pasta was, and still is, perfection. We'd flank the dish with sides of corn on the cob, a garlic-studded green such as escarole, a balsamic-slicked watercress salad and even some barbecued meat for the non-crab lovers of the family.

If the catch was on the small side, we would opt for an equally delicious main course of garlic-baked blue crabs. We would remove the shells and inedible innards, then briefly oven-bake the crustaceans in a bath of garlic, oregano, olive oil, butter and white wine. The sweet, tender and mildly briny crab meat turned opaque, and the scent of garlic and herbs filled the air. Next to the fresh crabs, we'd toast a loaf of Pullman bread—Wonder Bread back then, a fresh loaf today—to soak up the juices from the crab shells.

At my restaurants, I offer crab dishes that connect to my childhood, but I also like to showcase the versatility of all types of crabs. At Perilla, where the cuisine tends to skew toward Italian-American and Eastern European influences, I serve a spaghetti with crab gravy studded with crushed red chili flakes, fennel seed and Thai basil. It's a variation on what I grew up with, but it has more aggressive seasoning. I'll use peekytoe crab meat instead of blue crabs and I'll create a crab stock with green crabs to enhance the flavor and add more depth—it helps with the umami of the dish.

At my restaurant Kin Shop, which focuses on contemporary Thai food, I've started a Monday night crab dinner series, highlighting at least three different species of crab spread over four courses. We've made stuffed blue crabs with pork, fried Jonah crab claws and spicy crab noodles with king or Dungeness crab. When soft-shell crab is in season, we've served a whole fried one with Thai influences.

When traveling, I'm always drawn to crab dishes I see on a menu. Or better yet, when I am out of town and staying at the home of a friend or family member, I ask the locals where I can get fresh crabs since I enjoy cooking when on vacation.

The absolute key when selecting crab is freshness. If the crabs are lifeless, don't buy them. You want crabs with at least a little movement left in them, preferably more. And never buy crabs from a fishmonger or store you don't trust.

To this day, my mother and I still plan crabbing trips when I go back to my hometown. Perhaps our roles have changed slightly, with me taking the reins in the kitchen, but the joy I get from the process sends me right back to my days as a child pacing the dock. I still work with the flavors I grew up with, and can't wait to get my hands on the tender crab meat as soon as it emerges from the oven. My mother would add the raw ingredients and liquid directly to the top of the cleaned crabs before baking them, whereas I sauté the ingredients to bring out all the flavor and then pour them onto the crabs, but either way works.

—Harold Dieterle was the winner of the first season of “Top Chef.” He is chef and owner of the restaurants Perilla and Kin Shop, both in New York.

## Garlic-Baked Blue Crabs With Oregano, Basil and Pullman Loaf

**Total Time:** 30 minutes **Serves:** 4

### Ingredients

**2 tablespoons butter, melted**

**1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil**

**4 tablespoons garlic, minced**

**1 cup dry white wine**

**1 tablespoon fresh oregano**

**Salt, to taste**

**Black pepper, to taste**

**24 blue crabs, cleaned**

**8 slices Pullman loaf**

**¼ cup fresh basil, roughly chopped**

### What To Do

**1.** Preheat oven to 375 degrees. To a saucepan on medium heat, add butter and olive oil. Add garlic and sauté until lightly browned, 2-3 minutes. Remove pan from heat and add wine, oregano and salt and pepper, to taste. Return pan to heat and sauté contents for another 1-2 minutes. If you happen to have saved the roe from the crabs, add it to the hot pan, mixing it in evenly with the contents.

**2.** Place cleaned crabs on a baking sheet, belly-up. Spoon contents of garlic and oil mixture evenly onto each crab. Place baking sheet in oven and bake until meat becomes bright white and claws turn red in color, about 20 minutes.

**3.** When crabs are nearly cooked, toast bread slices in the toaster oven until they are a light golden brown, about 3 minutes.

**4.** When crabs are ready, transfer them to a platter. Top generously with chopped basil. Serve with toasted bread on the side for dipping. Be sure to give your guests bowls for discarded crab shells.

*Chef's tip:* When preparing crabs, be sure to stun them, either with a blast of hot water or by soaking them in ice-cold water. It'll make them easier to deal with. They can be fast and their claws aren't that forgiving.