

PEEL 'UM, EAT 'UM, AND SUCK THE HEADS LOCAL CRAWFISH

BY JENNIFER CHANDLER

Crawfish season has arrived! But you don't have to head down to the Big Easy to enjoy this delicacy. Several mid-Southerners know a thing or two about this Cajun crustacean.

Once deemed a poor man's food from the swamp waters of Southern Louisiana, these little lobster-like crustaceans were a treat that local fisherman enjoyed only at home. It wasn't until they were featured at the Breaux Bridge Centennial Celebration in 1959 that crawfish gained widespread social acceptance. Once the world discovered the sweet, tasty meat of this Louisiana delicacy, they started showing up not only in backyard boiling pots but also on restaurant tables. Due to their rise in popularity, crawfish are now commercially farmed throughout the South and, luckily for us, are now available in the mid-South.

Ron Pigue is a rice farmer just across the Mississippi River in Paragould, Arkansas. He jokes that he got into the crawfish business "by mistake." Back in 2000, when the prices of rice and soybeans were down, Ron decided to flood one of his fields and see if he could raise crawfish. His love of their tasty meat inspired him to see if he could make extra income from his fields with these burrowing crustaceans. "We ate crawfish when we were kids and it wasn't cool," he explains with a chuckle. Now crawfish is "cool" and Ron's Delta Crawfish

venture includes a market, a catering business and 60-seat restaurant in addition to the more than 200 acres on which he farms crawfish.

Hylle Crawfish Farms in Coldwater, Arkansas has a similar story. "We had been rice farmers for years, but when the market dropped, we started looking for supplemental income," explains Matt Hylle. The Hylle family stocked their first fields back in 2001 and now farm about 160 acres of crawfish each year.

Rice fields are the perfect habitat for crawfish. "To raise crawfish, you need some sort of vertical substrate, like rice or sorghum," explains Clifford Tillman, owner of Cajun Crawdad's, "the crawfish feed off of the microbes that grow in the rice straw."

Clifford's farms are in Louisiana just across the river from Natchez, Mississippi. Back in 2001, he converted his family's catfish ponds into crawfish ponds and started Cajun Crawdad's, Inc. Since he lives in Memphis, he sells most of his crawfish in his hometown. In addition to supplying restaurants, he also has two locations that sell both live and boiled crawfish. "It all started with the Memphis in May Barbecue Cooking Contest," Clifford explains, "I got second place in the "Anything But" seafood division and my Dad said I needed my own crawfish business."



Clifford Tillman harvesting crawfish. *Photo by James Aaron.*

In Southern Louisiana, crawfish season traditionally runs from Mardi Gras (mid-February) to the end of June. But since the weather is colder in the mid-South, our local season is April through June. In Arkansas, rice is traditionally planted in April and then harvested in September.

Rice farmers annually flood their fields after the harvest in order to conserve topsoil by reducing the impact of rainfall as well as to prevent erosion. As an added benefit, the water helps decay the leftover plant matter that would otherwise have to be burned off. The fields then lay fallow for a year, or are used for soybeans, before being planted with rice again.

These fields that are being rotated out of rice planting are the ones local farmers use for their crawfish crop. The rice crop residue and regrowth of the rice stubble after the grain harvest is the ideal forage crop used for growing crawfish.

Crawfish ponds are not stocked with hatchery-reared young as in other forms of aquaculture. Farmers rely on reproduction by unharvested crawfish from the previous year or on mature crawfish that are stocked to produce young naturally. In the late spring, crawfish mate in the open water. To protect their fertilized eggs from predators, the females will burrow into the ground. Each crawfish can produce 400 to 500 babies

at a time. These babies, referred to as “brood stock,” live under their mothers tails until they are large enough to survive on their own.

When the crawfish ponds are drained at the season’s end for re-planting, crawfish of all ages and sizes, whether mature or immature, male or female, will dig or retreat to burrows as deep as six to eight feet to survive the draining of the ponds. (Hence the nickname “mudbugs.”)

When the fields are re-flooded in the fall, the crawfish emerge from underground to feed on the rice stubble all winter. It takes a crawfish three to five months, on average, to reach maturity. Every time they molt, which is about every two to three weeks, they double in size. By early Spring, they have reached a marketable size. “A good market-size crawfish is about 3 ½ inches,” explains Ron, “That’s when they are at their best. Any smaller, they haven’t reached their potential growth. Any larger, there is more shell than meat.”

“The hardest part about crawfish farming is the harvest,” explains Clifford. “It is a very labor intensive process.” First the traps need to be placed in the pond. Since the crawfish are harvested in a boat, the traps need to be carefully placed in rows. Specially designed for catching crawfish, these traps resemble a three-sided pyramid with the corners pushed in. A pellet bait lures the crawfish into the trap. During the harvesting process, the farmer picks up one trap and

CRAWFISH PIE

From Clifford Tillman of Cajun Crawdad's, Inc.

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 (14-ounce) pack of diced frozen trinity (celery, yellow onion, green bell pepper)
- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 cup water
- ½ cup tomato sauce
- 4 tablespoons cornstarch
- Cajun seasoning (Tony Chachere's preferred) to taste
- 1 pound crawfish tails and fat
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 tablespoon parsley, finely chopped
- Pinch thyme
- 1 tablespoon green onion, finely chopped
- 1 pack of refrigerated Pillsbury Pie Crust

Place the vegetable oil, trinity and garlic in a large cast iron skillet over medium heat and simmer until the onions are soft, stirring frequently. Remove half of the cooked vegetables mixture and set aside.

Combine ½ cup water, cornstarch and tomato sauce and pour into the cast iron skillet on top of the vegetables and bring to a simmer, stirring constantly until it thickens to the consistency of ketchup. Season to taste with the Cajun seasoning. Reduce heat to low and let simmer.

In another cast iron skillet, add vegetables that were set aside, butter, the remaining ½ cup of water and the crawfish tails and fat. Simmer on medium heat for about 5 minutes. Add the crawfish tail mixture to the tomato sauce mixture in the large cast iron skillet. Add parsley, thyme and green onions and mix together. Taste and add more Cajun seasoning or salt if needed.

Pre-heat oven to 450°. Place one of the two pie crusts into a greased 9-inch pie pan and form to bottom of pan. Spoon in the crawfish filling and place the second pie crust over the top. Seal the edges of the pie by pinching crust together. Using a fork, poke about 10 sets of holes in the top of the pie crust. For a golden look to the crust, brush some egg wash onto the top crust.

Place pie pan on a baking pan to catch any boilover and place in the oven for about 5 minutes. Turn oven down to 400° and let bake another 15 to 20 minutes or until crust is golden brown. Remove from the oven and let cool 20 to 30 minutes. Serves 4 to 6.

BEER PAIRING, courtesy of *Bosc's Brewing Co.* *Growlers available at 827 S. Main St. and 2120 Madison Avenue.*—**Ghost River Golden Ale** will refresh your palate and deliver a refreshing balance to this spicy pie.



empties it into his boat while he travels on to the next trap. He then places the empty trap in the place where he pulls up the full one...and so the process continues, row after row, acre after acre.

Once caught, a crawfish can live for up to seven days if you drop their metabolism down by cooling them and keeping them moist. Since you never want to soak them in water, the melting ice needs to be drained and changed regularly until the crawfish are ready to be cooked. "The key to good crawfish is quality control," Ron adds, "Whereas they can live longer, ideally it should only be two to three days from farm to table."

When it comes to eating these little mudbugs, crawfish boils where guests "peel 'um, eat 'um, and suck the heads" are one of the most popular ways to enjoy this Cajun treat. Live crawfish are boiled in a spicy mixture of garlic, onions, corn cobs, new potatoes and the all important cayenne pepper. The finished product is dumped on a platter or a table covered with newspaper and guests eat the tasty meat of the crawfish tails and then suck the spicy juices from the head. "It's a very social food," describes Clifford. "People aren't sitting at one place, instead everyone is standing around a communal table and eating together."

When it comes to seasoning crawfish, most aficionados have their favorite spice blend. "It's like barbecue," explains Ron. "Everyone has their own recipe...and none are wrong." Ron has named his special blend after his farm's mascot "Delta Donnie." "I use more spice and less salt than some people...what makes mine unique is just a hint of clove," Ron adds. Clifford has also developed his own secret seafood boil. "You want your lips to tingle...but not fall off," he jokes.

Crawfish can also be enjoyed in more "refined" dishes such as Crawfish Bisque or Crawfish Étouffée. In these recipes, just the tail meat is used. Another iconic Cajun favorite is crawfish pie, where tail



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meat is mixed with a tomato and trinity blend and then stuffed in a flaky pie crust.

Now that you know where to find this Cajun crustacean locally, don't let crawfish season pass you by without "sucking the head and eating the tail" of at least one (or in my case several dozen) mudbugs! *eM*

Cajun Crawdad's, Inc.

955 Goodman Rd. West in Horn Lake, MS

Also at: The corner of Germantown Rd. and Trinity Rd. in Cordova

901-482-2590

www.cajuncrawdads.com

Delta Crawfish Market

4660 Hwy 412 E, Paragould, AR 72450

870-335-2555

www.deltacrawfish.com

Hylle Crawfish Farms

Intersection of Hwy 75 & 42, Coldwater, Arkansas

870-755-BUGS

www.hyllecrawfish.com

If you think you want to raise crawfish, Clifford Tillman recommends that you check out the *Louisiana Crawfish Production Manual* from LSU Ag Center. www.lsuagcenter.com

Once a restaurateur, Jennifer Chandler is now a contributing food writer to several magazines both locally and nationwide. She is a food stylist and the author of *Simply Salads*.

CRAWFISH BOIL

From Clifford Tillman of Cajun Crawdad's, Inc.

- 30 pounds live crawfish (one sack)
- 2 cups salt, for purging
- 2 (3-ounce) boxes crab boil seasoning
- 10 small onions, peeled and halved
- 2 pounds cocktail smokies or sliced Boudin sausage
- 5 pounds small red or new potatoes, unpeeled
- 4 heads garlic, sliced in half
- 10 ears of fresh corn on the cob, shucked and broken in halves

To purge the crawfish, place them in a large plastic tub or a large ice chest and rinse them in enough changes of water for the water to run reasonably clear. Then add more water to cover the crawfish and add 2 cups of salt. Stir for 3 minutes, then rinse crawfish. Keep the cleaned and drained crawfish uncovered until ready to cook.

Fill a large 18- to 20-gallon pot three-quarters full with water. Add the crab boil seasoning. Cover the pot and bring the water to a boil over high heat. Boil 2 to 3 minutes to allow the spices to mix well.

Using a large wire basket that fits into the pot, add the onions, sausage, potatoes, garlic and corn. Maintain a boil and cook 10 minutes or until the potatoes are tender. Add the crawfish, stirring them a bit. Cook an additional 7 to 10 minutes, being careful not to overcook the crawfish. Remove the wire basket from pot.

To serve, line a table with newspaper. Lift the basket from the stock and drain. Dump the basket ingredients directly on the newspaper. Serves 10 to 12.

BEER PAIRING, *courtesy of Boscos Brewing Co. Growlers available at 827 S. Main St. and 2120 Madison Avenue.—Boscos Bombay IPA* will provide enough flavor to stand up to the spiciness of the crawfish boil. The dry character of this beer will also cleanse the palate and put out the fire.