

25. Recipes from the United States – Part Three, the Chesapeake Region

'The Chesapeake Bay is the largest estuary in the United States and one of the most useful in the world. It was created in the last 15,000 years by the flooding of the lower valley of the greatest river on the East Coast, the mighty Susquehanna. As a drowned valley, it has hundreds of peripheral rivers, bays, and creeks, a very long shoreline and extensive areas of shallow water.' L. Eugene Cronin thus begins his introduction to *The Chesapeake Bay in Maryland: an atlas of natural resources*, a work which explains in both words and maps the extraordinary importance of this region for aquatic life.

The shoreline of the Bay and its tributaries is estimated to be over 8000 miles (13,000 kilometres). The waters, fed by the Potomac, the Susquehanna and numerous smaller river systems, have a salinity which varies from 0 to 20 parts of salt per 1000 parts of water. The inflow of fresh water from these rivers maintains this pattern of salinity and provides a supply of nutrients (as well as of pollutants). As Cronin says: 'The result is a biological treasure. The nutrients make it possible for plankton and rooted aquatic plants to produce enormous quantities of organic material. These feed the world's largest crops of oysters and clams in water salty enough for them but not salty enough for their worst natural predators.' The waters of low salinity also provide important spawning grounds for striped bass, shad and herring. And it is the principal habitat of the blue crab.

The early settlers found the abundance of seafood almost overwhelming. Captain John Smith wrote in 1608 that: 'We . . . found in diverse places that abundance of fish lying so thick with their heads above the water, as for want of nets, our barge driving amongst them, we attempted to catch them with a frying pan, but we found it a bad instrument to catch fish with.' (They did better later in the day, in shallow water, by transfixing fish on their sword-points.)

The Indians, of course, had much to teach the settlers, about the construction of fish weirs, in which sturgeon, for example, could be taken. John Smith makes a tantalizing reference to what sounds like a sort of sturgeon pâté. 'We had more sturgeon than could be devoured by dog or man, of which the

industrious by drying and pounding, mingled with caviar, sorrel, and other wholesome herbs would make bread and good meat.'

The fisheries in the Chesapeake have changed greatly. There was a time when the Bay was embellished by numerous sailing craft of specialized design and great beauty, such as the bugeye (a large oyster-dredger), its successor the skipjack, the all-purpose pungy and the oldest of all, the log canoe. Log canoes were the craft most used for oyster tonging until power boats superseded them. (Two kinds of oyster tong are shown below.)

These changes have occurred in a natural way, and the fisheries have continued to prosper and evolve. Some of the enormous hills of oyster shells which can be seen at Kent Narrows, for example, bear silent witness to the centuries of seafood-gathering; and they are still growing.

Chesapeake was an Indian name meaning 'mother of waters'. The Bay has also mothered many good recipes, of which a few samples follow.



Maryland Stuffed Shad Roe

serves four

Plain shad roe is excellent; but there are occasions when one wants to turn it into something more grand. This recipe based on one in the bicentennial edition of *Maryland's Way*, meets the need.

shad roes, 4 pairs

butter, 80 g (3 oz)

lump crab meat, 220 g (½ lb)

for the sauce

melted butter, 1½ tbs; flour

1½ tbs; single cream, 1 cup;

salt and pepper

Poach the roes, drain them and let them cool. Then fry them in the butter in a heavy skillet until they are a rich brown on both sides.

Make the cream sauce by stirring the flour into the melted butter over a gentle heat. Gradually add the cream, stirring, until the sauce has thickened. Season it and add the crab meat to it.

Split each half-roe open, taking care not to cut it completely in two. Stuff each with the sauce. Reheat briefly in the oven and serve with, for example, fresh Maryland asparagus and a Hollandaise sauce (page 316).

To Boil Rockfish, by Mrs Mary Randolph

Many of the early American cookery books were, not surprisingly, little more than reprints of or anthologies from the English books which were available at the time. Gradually, however, the impact of a new way of life and the need to deal with new foodstuffs introduced a genuine American flavour into American cookery books. By 1860, when Mrs Mary Randolph had *The Virginia Housewife* published at Philadelphia, there had been plenty of time for this evolution to occur; and her book is a good and interesting one. Here are her instructions for dealing with 'rock' (page 86), a fish found only on the American side of the Atlantic.

'The best part of the rock is the head and shoulders – clean it nicely, put it into the fish kettle with cold water and salt, boil it gently and skim it well; when done, drain off the water, lay it in the dish, and garnish with scraped horse-radish; have two boats of butter nicely melted with chopped parsley, or for a change, you may have anchovy butter; the roe and liver should be fried in separate dishes. If any of the rock be left, it will make a delicious dish next day; – pick it in small pieces, put it in a stew pan with a gill [$\frac{1}{4}$ pint or 150 ml] of water, a good lump of butter, some salt, a large spoonful of lemon pickle, and one of pepper vinegar – shake it over the fire till perfectly hot, and serve it up. It is almost equal to stewed crab.'

Devilled Crab

serves four

Frederick Philip Stieff described his book *Eat, Drink and Be Merry in Maryland* as an anthology, and ascribed the recipes to their sources. But the art with which he made his selection, the catholic choice of illustrations (even this one from *Punch* – Lady, 'I don't like the look of this haddock.' Fishmonger, 'If it's looks you're after you'd better buy a goldfish.'). the black and red cover redolent of the 1930s, all these things conspire to make this a great cookery book. And with what glee must Stieff have juxtaposed a stilted foreword by the Mayor of Baltimore ('I sincerely trust that this volume . . .') with a letter to himself from Emily Post, recalling in romantic prose his Maryland hospitality, the daily dinner party at three o'clock and the 'black band of wrist between the white cotton glove and pulled-up coat sleeve of Old James, the butler, as he reached over and lifted the huge domed silver cover off of a platter piled high with fried oysters . . .'

However, à nos fruits de mer. Stieff must have deliberated carefully in selecting a recipe for devilled crab, an important dish in the eyes of Marylanders. His choice fell on that of the sober-sounding and manifestly competent Mr H. R. Bowen of the Chesapeake Steamship Company at Baltimore. Here it is.

'1 cup crab meat, ½ cup milk, ⅛ teaspoon dry mustard, ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper, ½ green pepper chopped fine, 1 cup bread crumbs, yolks of 2 raw eggs, 1 teaspoon salt, ½ cup melted butter. Mix crab meat with crumbs (which have been moistened with milk) and egg yolks. Add mustard, salt, cayenne pepper, green peppers and butter. Mix well. Fill crab shells with mixture, sift crumbs lightly on top, dot with butter. Brown quickly in very hot oven, being careful they do not burn. Crab shells should be washed and scrubbed in very hot water before being stuffed.'

Crab and Skate Salad

serves six to eight as a first course

This recipe was cunningly devised by Evelene Spencer, co-author of the classic *Fish Cookery* (Boston, 1922) to bring the despised skate on to the American table on the back of the respected crab. The mixture is pleasantly perplexing, since the strands of meat look alike but have different tastes. Her instructions, slightly expanded, are as follows.

crab meat, cooked, 170 g (6 oz), i.e. a small tin, yielding 1 cup or so	mayonnaise, ¼ litre (½ pint) a lemon, juice only salt
skate, poached, ¼ kg (½ lb), i.e. 1 cup of flaked flesh	paprika lettuce leaves
celery, finely minced, 6–8 stalks, to yield 1½–2 cups	cream, whipped (optional)

Mix the crab meat, flaked skate, minced celery and mayonnaise together with a wooden salad spoon. Add the lemon juice, season with salt and dust the top with paprika. Arrange lettuce leaves in little nests. Mould helpings of the salad in an after-dinner coffee cup, pressing down lightly, and turn them out on to the lettuce nests. A top dressing of mayonnaise thinned down with whipped cream may be added if you wish.

Mrs Spencer mentions elsewhere that if one has difficulty in obtaining skate, halibut cheeks may be used instead, since this part of the halibut has meat arranged similarly in long strands. Halibut pretending to be skate pretending to be crab! Was there no end to the deceptions which this good woman was prepared to recommend?

My daughter Caroline tried out the halibut cheeks version and found it highly successful, but recommends adding pepper to the seasoning.

Maryland Crab Meat Cakes

makes two each for four people

Helen Avalynne Tawes, we read on the dust-jacket, 'was born and raised in the seaport town of Crisfield, Maryland, at one time referred to as the seafood capital of the world and situated on the famous Eastern Shore of Maryland. In 1915 she married J. Millard Tawes, a young businessman of Crisfield, who later became Governor of Maryland.' Her book *My Favorite Maryland Recipes* includes menus which she used in the Governor's Mansion, featuring Maryland dishes such as the crab meat cakes for which she gives this recipe. It should be, and is, authentic.

cooked crab meat, 450 g (1 lb)	cayenne pepper, ½ tsp
rich (i.e. creamy) milk, 1 cup	dry mustard, 1 tsp
fresh breadcrumbs, 1 cup	Worcestershire sauce, 2 tsp
an egg	tabasco, 3 drops

'Mix above ingredients well – make 8 individual patties and roll in fine, dry breadcrumbs. Fry in deep fat until golden brown.'

This kind of crab meat cake is not too rich, thanks to the breadcrumbs. Crab or lobster meat prepared Norfolk style, which is to say with nothing else but butter and seasoning, is too rich for some. I have been eating it on and off at Martin's restaurant in Georgetown, D.C., for nearly thirty years, but I plan to give it up on my sixty-fifth birthday. [And I did.]

Maryland Clam Fritters

makes five fritters each for four people

This is a favourite dish on the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay and indeed in many other places. Any clams can be used, including the neglected razor clam (page 240).

clams, 24 medium or 12–18 large	baking powder, ½ tsp
eggs, 2	salt and pepper
flour, 50 grams (2 oz)	cooking oil, 200 ml (⅓ pint)
milk, a little (optional)	

Steam the clams open, unless you are using ready-shucked ones. Drain them, but not too thoroughly, then mince or grind them quite finely. Combine eggs, flour, milk if used, baking powder and seasoning into a batter and mix the minced clams into this.

Form the clam mixture into cakes and fry them in batches for 3 or 4 minutes on each side.

This recipe can be applied to mussels and produces quite good results. You would need 36–48 mussels, depending on their size.

Eastern Shore Oyster Soup

serves (?)eight or ten

Josephine Redue ran a private school at Chestertown around the turn of the century. She also collected recipes, with discrimination, from friends and neighbours and published these in a little booklet, *The Eastern Shore Cook Book*, which charmingly expressed her personality and in which she found space to give general advice, such as to be sure and rest after eating. 'To attempt hard work or close study within an hour after eating, invites derangement of the digestive organs.'

I copied out this recipe one winter's evening, in an old plantation house near Chestertown, to the sound of ice floes crashing against the little pier where peaches were once loaded for Baltimore, and the yacking of Canada geese as they flew in a skein over the river or settled by the hundreds on the ice.

'Wash and drain three quarts of oysters; put them on with three quarts of water, three onions stuck full of cloves and two or three slices of lean ham; add pepper and salt. Boil until reduced one-half. Thicken with a spoonful of flour, half a cup of cream, and the yolks of six eggs, well beaten. Boil a few minutes after thickening, taking care that it does not curdle.'

Oyster Crab Omelette

In describing the oyster crab on page 206, I promised a recipe from the unparalleled collection formed by H. Franklyn Hall. This writer, who mingles modest disclaimers of scholarship with proud accounts of his wide experience, and who pledges that 'every receipt in this book is absolutely correct', had been Chef of the Boothby Hotel Company in Philadelphia for fifteen years when he published his book in 1901. He asserts that his restaurants contained 'the generally acknowledged largest and finest oyster and shell fish department in the world'.

'Oyster Crab Omelets. Take from twenty-five to forty live oyster crabs for every portion, or person, you wish to serve, and blanch them in boiling water, drain dry, and add to every twenty-five or forty oyster crabs one half gill heavy cream sauce, heat hot, and place as much of the crabs and sauce as you can inside of a three egg, plain omelet, place on a long dish or platter, pour balance of crabs and cream sauce around edge of omelet, sprinkle with chopped parsley and serve quickly.'

I wish that there was space to print also Hall's real extravaganza, Canopy [sic] à la Lorenzo. Each person receives a crouton with a bell-shaped structure on it, incorporating 50 oyster crabs, ¼ truffle, crab meat, chicken meat and cream, all dusted with green breadcrumbs!