

## Maryland's Top 12 Crab Houses

Get your hands dirty during dinner by digging into some crabs

By Stephanie Citron



Nothing says summertime south of the Mason-Dixon Line like dressing up in grungy shorts and flip-flops and heading over to a waterside shack to get your hands dirty eating dinner. Steamed, Old Bay-encrusted, Chesapeake Bay blue crabs are surely the most familiar icon of Maryland cuisine. Just what makes those creepy-crawling crustaceans such a temptation? Some swear by the gritty, salt-pepper "finishing" spice that makes crabs appear freshly plucked from the bottom of the ocean floor, but others say it's just the primal process of picking apart a crab.



Long before American food lovers became fixated on "eating the whole animal," Marylanders had it down pat. The skill required is dissection. Possibly nowhere else in the country can you see everyone — from the governor to a garage mechanic — salivate at the prospect of tearing open a sea creature, ripping off its limbs, digging out its guts, and then devouring it. It's an art. It's also a social outing, with hands-on entertainment.

Dining at a crab house is a unique experience. The waitstaff speaks jargon you may need translated: "Larges are 77" means "large"-sized crabs (measuring 5½ to 6 inches) are \$77 per dozen (while it is possible to order single crabs, the norm is by the dozen). Seasoned crab-eaters respond with "How're they running?" to determine which size is "heaviest" (meatier). Availability, sizes, and prices of crabs vary each day, depending on the catch. "Lump" is the large meat chunks from the body of the crab. "Backfin" is smaller pieces of body meat. Old Bay is the famous rock-salt peppery spice caked atop the crabs. Natty Boh is Maryland-speak for National Bohemian Beer (no judgments; even the most sophisticated local palate unabashedly consumes this locally incepted brew from time to time). "Soft-shell" crabs are a famous Maryland delicacy, harvested after they've discarded the shells they've outgrown, but before the new shells harden. Somewhat resembling a giant spider, they are eaten whole, down to the dangling legs. They are best broiled in garlic butter or deep-fried on a roll.

Local Maryland crab prices have soared because of overfishing, erosion, and the storms that wreak havoc on fish populations. Since a dozen jumbo-size crabs can cost \$100 or more, so you'll want to ensure your experience is worthwhile. Despite the five-star prices, the best crab houses are the aesthetic antithesis of a chic eatery — picking crabs is messy business! While some occupy prime real estate along a scenic shoreline, many landmark establishments are nondescript mid-century era taverns buried in unremarkable working-class neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city.

So how can you tell a hole-in-the-wall from a diamond-in-the-rough? Or a scenic, waterfront crab house with local catch from a tourist trap? Before you get cracking, check out our list of Maryland's Top Crab Houses, which all meet the following crab-picky criteria of true-blue connoisseurs detailed on the next page.



- Great crab houses receive live deliveries daily, preferably of local blue crabs. While Maryland blue crabs are considered "in season" from May through November, the best ones are fished September through November, after they've had the summer to fatten up. Since it is illegal to catch crabs in Maryland from December through April, many crab houses receive regular "off-season" shipments from Texas and Louisiana, whose warm waterways produce a very respectable crustacean.
- Upon arriving, the hostess asks if you'll be having crabs before leading you to a table covered in heavy brown paper, topped with mallets, a roll of paper towels, and buckets to discard the shells.
- The crabs are steamed to order — which means they take at least 20 minutes to arrive, piping hot, at your table.
- Genuine crab houses offer two styles of crab soup: traditional Maryland-style (tomato-based) and thick-as-oatmeal Cream of Crab. The menu should also include steamed shrimp slathered with Old Bay-style seasoning, fresh Maryland corn-on-the-cob, and prepared crab dishes like crabcakes and Crab Imperial.
- There are sinks outside the restrooms to wash the gravelly seasoning from your hands.
- The place is filled with dressed-down locals.

—Stephanie Citron