

Canvassing crab options on North Coast

Review and Photos by
THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

During dark winter months you can see the boats from shore, their lights twinkling on the horizon, fishing for Dungeness crab.

Every year millions of pounds are pulled from the Pacific coast's icy waters, and yet the Dungeness harvest remains sustainable.

Despite such abundance, many Oregonians find the seemingly astronomical prices of Dungeness crab wholly unappetizing. (For more on the rising price of crab, see sidebar.)

Cost be darned, Dungeness is still found somewhat regularly on local menus, though it is largely relegated to a handful of all-too-familiar dishes: crab cakes, cocktails, melts and the occasional cioppino. Sometimes you'll find crab flesh nakedly sprinkled atop a steak (Oscar style) or salad, which is as much adorning luxury product as culinary creativity.

Granted, enjoying crab elementally — preferably a seasoned, whole-shell boiling, then cracking and dunking in butter — is an essential way to celebrate our local crustacean.

But a catch so emblematic of our region deserves more. As much as springer salmon, foraged mushrooms or seasonable vegetables, Dungeness crab, too, ought to be the muse of local chefs. Dungeness deserves — nay, beckons — to be explored, expanded and elevated.

With this in mind, I set out in search of the North Coast's most extraordinary Dungeness crab dishes.

Albatross

My first stop was Albatross in Astoria for a Dungeness Deviled Egg (\$8).

The egg wore crab like an expensive crown. But, hey, it's the only such crown I'm aware of, and



Albatross & Co.: Dungeness Crab Deviled Egg



Bridgewater Bistro: Dungeness Crab Cheesecake

that's something. Served in two halves, the eggy bowls cupped a familiar mayonnaise mix with hints of diced pickle relish. The crab was dusted with paprika. As melts prove, the lean, salty, faintly sweet flesh of crab plays well with milky creams, and it did so here.

The crabby egg was a silky smooth protein blast; all killer, no filler. A fine midday snack, it perked me up. But there wasn't much wonder about it. Imagine it, and you're there.

Bridgewater Bistro

The Savory Crab Cheesecake at Bridgewater Bistro (\$12) seemed a little further afield, though the dish has a precedent.

As I was told, Bridgewater chefs were vacationing in New Orleans when they spied the Creole version, made with blue crab. The chefs figured, as many wise person with access would: This would be way better with Dungeness. The recipe begins as normal: with loads of cream cheese, sour and heavy creams. When it's time for sugar, savory spices are substituted.

Like a cousin of quiche, the cake was dainty — as it should



Pacific Way Cafe: Dungeness Crab Pizza



Castaways Restaurant & Tiki Bar: Caribbean Crab Fritters

be. Salty, fatty and heart-stoppingly creamy, it's quintessential New Orleans. Mixed in amidst the supple, melty cheese filling, the crab's effect was as textural as anything, adding a bit of sinewy suppleness, and a whisper of cleansing sea. The cake was cradled by a dusty pecan crust and surrounded by a meaty mushroom meunière sauce.

Altogether, the savory cheesecake became something decadent — not because it featured an expensive ingredient, but for the envelope of rich flavor.

Pacific Way Cafe

At Gearhart's Pacific Way Cafe the crab's effect in the Dungeness Crab pizza too were subtle, a kiss of ocean spray amidst more prominent components. Between a thick layer of melted mozzarella and a lightly acidic sun-dried tomato and nutty, herby pesto sauce, the crab was humble. There was a fair amount of it, though, which made for the most expensive pizza I've ever seen (and in Cannon Beach I've seen some ridiculously expensive pizza).

A 10-inch pie starts at \$21, with an 18-inch large bursting the

bank at \$54. While the execution of the pizza, from the medium-thin crust to the cooked-just-right cheese, was excellent, the dish didn't so much highlight the crab as afford it equanimity. Compared to pepperoni or sausage, crab keeps its voice down.

Castaways

Of all the dishes I tried during my search, none shined a brighter spotlight on our most coveted crustacean than Castaway's in Cannon Beach. The Caribbean Crab Fritters (\$16) not only made crab the star, but broadened its essence.

"What I wanted to do with the crab fritters," Chef Josh Tuckam said, "is everything that crab cakes around here aren't."

In Tuckman's estimation, that meant including a lot of crab, not thickening it with a bunch of bread. There were bits of binders in the fritters, including toasted breadcrumbs, goat and jack cheeses, but there was no doubt: These things are meaty! Sealed behind the thick-crust crunch of vexingly seasoned panko breading is a crab that's juicier, more lively and irresistible than perhaps any I've had. It's truly expansive — wide and sultry.

Tuckman doesn't stop there.

The two fritters, a little bigger than golf balls, topped with swirls of "creoli" (Creole aioli) are served with a delightfully colorful, sinus-clearing spicy salsa of mango, green onion, microgreens, blueberries and edible flowers. The syrupy fruits swirl with a savory brown Bahamian stew sauce. Together they balance deeply, magnificently. And while you drag bites of fritter through the swirling sauces, you'll marvel at the clever alchemy melding savory and sweet. But all the while crab remains the star.

Who will be next, I wonder, to afford our local delicacy such a worthwhile stage?

A dive into Dungeness

Dungeness crab is a microcosm of the vexing, byzantine global seafood market. In many ways — and particularly from local vantage — the market appears upside down. According to seafoodhealthfacts.org, 90 percent of the seafood Americans eat comes from other countries. Meanwhile, 90 percent of America's own catch is exported.

Exports, particularly to China, have much to do with the rise in Dungeness prices in the last decade. Dungeness fishing season, which peaks from December to April, coincides with Chinese New Year (falling between late January and February). The Chinese have taken to enjoying Dungeness crab during the annual celebrations and are paying top dollar to ship it live, by plane — far more than American markets.

According to The Oregonian, during the 2009-10 season, fisherman were paid \$1.76 per pound for Dungeness crab by processors. At the turn of 2017, crab fisherman on the Pacific Coast went on strike when processors backed off an agreement to pay \$3 per pound, pushing instead for a reduction to \$2.75. The strike ended after 11 days when the groups settled on a price of \$2.875 per pound.

For reference, a 2-pound crab contains about a half pound of meat. At Northwest Wild Products in Astoria, a pound of Dungeness crab meat retails for \$33. At Bridgewater Bistro, adding 3 ounces of Dungeness to a dish costs \$9.50.

Restaurants likely pay lower than retail prices, but this much is clear: The price of putting fresh Dungeness crab on a plate can be prohibitive. Which is a shame, especially when you're close enough to the source where you can see the boats fishing.