



BUTTER-GARLIC CRABS



BARBECUE CRABS



BOILED CRABS

J.C. REID PHOTOS

BENNO'S BLUE CRAB BONANZA

By J.C. REID

GALVESTON — On a recent Saturday afternoon, I sat on the patio at Benno's on the Beach eating what seemed like bushels of whole blue crabs. I was with four of my most die-hard blue crab-loving friends. Amid the cacophony of a choppy Gulf surf, screeching seagulls and the roar of Harley-Davidsons cruising Seawall Boulevard, we quietly assumed the position of all serious crab eaters: heads down, wooden mallets at the ready, reams of paper towels within easy reach.

Eating blue crabs is somewhat of an art. The technique of eating whole blue crabs often takes years of delicious practice: the ability to delicately crack the claw without damaging the meat inside, extracting chunks of meat from even the tiniest of crevices in the crab's body, twisting and turning a crab leg so it pops out with a nugget of crab meat known as a "crab lollipop." On this day, we sat and worked earnestly, employing our learned technique, goggling at the occasional jumbo lump of crab meat extracted, oblivious to each other except for the occasional wayward bit of splintered crab shell that would fly into our purview, courtesy of our neighbor's overexcited mallet.

Among many blue crab connoisseurs in the greater Houston area, Benno's is the gold standard in both quality and size of crab, as well as in the consistency and diversity of preparation. In my small group of crab aficionados, the phrase most often heard is "I've never eaten a bad crab at Benno's."

"We source all of our crabs directly from local crab fishermen around

benno's on the beach

1200 Seawall in Galveston

409-762-4621

hours 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Sundays-
Thursdays; 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Fridays and
Saturdays

Galveston," says Tracy Deltz, Benno's owner and manager (and son of founder Benno Deltz). Alluding to the consistent quality of his crabs, I asked Deltz about the rumor of Texas crab fishermen reserving Texas' best crabs for high-paying distributors along the east coast, particularly Maryland. "I've heard of that happening, but we certainly aren't affected by it. Our sources provide us with the best crabs that Galveston waters have to offer."

On the day I visited, the crabs bore this out — big, meaty "jumbos" measuring 5-6 inches across.

Blue crab season traditionally runs from around March through October when waters are warmest. However, because Texas Gulf Coast waters are relatively warm throughout most of

the year, Benno's can offer whole blue crab almost year-round. According to Deltz, the current harvest of crabs is a bumper crop: "Earlier in the season after the Gulf oil spill happened, supplies tightened up. But now, we're seeing the most crabs we've seen all year."

Benno's serves its crabs using two basic preparations: boiled and fried. Boiled comes in the original and the garlic-butter variety. The original is the simplest preparation: just a blue crab boiled in water and seasonings. If you want the most pure and essential flavor of blue crab, this is a great choice. Kicking it up a notch, the garlic-butter option douses the boiled crab in an unctuous sauce of garlic-infused butter that seeps into every crack and crevice of the crab. Gobs of the butter sauce fill the crab's body cavity and pool in the bottom of the tray in which the crabs arrive. Fresh garlic bread is provided for sopping up the remaining liquid.

The fried preparations, on the other hand, infuse the crab meat with an additional complexity of flavor. There's a traditional fried crab, which is breaded and then deep fried. The other dish is called "Cajun-fried" but is equivalent to the traditional Southeast Texas "barbecue crab" preparation. The cleaned crab is dredged in a spicy Cajun-influenced dry rub, then flash fried until the meat is moist and flaky, but not mushy.

A note on ordering and atmosphere at Benno's. You place your order at the counter, then take a number to your table where the food is delivered when it's ready. At the height of a summer-

time weekend, the line can get long (a 20-30 minute wait is not uncommon) and it can take just as long to get your food. But that's just part of the summertime tradition at Benno's. The atmosphere is casual. Families literally step off the beach, cross Seawall Boulevard and get in line. At the height of summer it's not unusual to see the patio filled with families wearing bathing suits or wrapped in beach towels. Fortunately, on this Saturday, there was no line and the restaurant was half full, thanks to summer winding down and school having just started the week before.

Whole blue crabs are ordered by the pound. On the day we visited, the cost was \$15.95 for two pounds. This is equivalent to about four large or five medium-size crabs. Among the five of us, we ordered two pounds of each preparation — original boiled, butter-garlic, traditional fried and Cajun fried — for a total of eight pounds. Combined with the included garlic bread, french fries and corn on the cob, we were all well-satisfied.

After polishing off the last of these summer crabs, we glanced around furtively at each other, orgy complete, the flotsam and jetsam of crab guts ringing our mouths, crab shell pieces pooling in our laps. We surveyed the destruction before us. Trays of deconstructed blue crabs covered the table, picked so perfectly clean that they appear to have been run through some type of crab woodchipper. Benno's never disappoints.

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