

NEW ORLEANS
Classic
SEAFOOD



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Classic
SEAFOOD

Recipes from Favorite Restaurants

K I T W O H L



PELICAN PUBLISHING COMPANY

GRETN A 2008

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INTRODUCTION

“IF IT SWIMS, WE’LL PROBABLY EAT IT.”

New Orleans is surrounded by water. In fact, it is below sea level – so low that seafood could jump from their natural habitat right onto our plates, if inclined. But we’re happy to give the seafood a hand up. And no hurricane is ever going to change that.

A day at the lake, or by a bayou, or sitting on the riverbank with a line in the water: glory. If there are a few fishing poles and crab nets in the garage, you’re probably a local. You also own a crawfish pot or two and propane burner rig. Some workers, when hired, announce that they will not be available during fishing season. This is not a deal-breaker as long as fresh fish is offered in return. As you can imagine, boat owners are very popular here, too. Face it; most Orleanians are natural born seafood aficionados. I do know one gentleman who wasn’t, but he moved.

Maybe it was the mudbugs.

You can call them crawfish if you prefer, but never call them crayfish. And respect those little suckers. We do. Mudbugs will sometimes sashay in a crawfish chorus line across a road from one bayou to another. Hundreds of them. When this happens, traffic stops; people either allow them to pass, or jump from their vehicles, and scoop them up.

Then there are those special times of the year when crawfish, shrimp, and crabs are in season together. We rejoice in backyards and parks. We roll up our sleeves, cover a table with black garbage bags topped by several layers of newspaper, and wait. The results, boiled in a huge pot, are drained and piled on the table. The rules are simple; there’s nothing dainty about the process. He who eats the fastest gets the most. Actually, unless you can quickly peel shrimp and crawfish – and crack crabs at warp speed – you could starve to death around these parts. That’s why we add potatoes, corn, sausage, and other nice things to the pot.

One afternoon a bunch of us had loaded the table at local seafood joint (everybody has a favorite neighborhood one-step-above-a-dive fish house. Mine is Franky and Johnny’s) with a three-crustation boil. Visitors – tourists, probably – seated at the next table watched as our arms flew and hands flailed, dismembering small creatures whose small parts also flailed and flew. Not a knife or fork in sight. Just smackin’ and smilin’.

“Ewwww, gross,” said one of the ladies at the tourist table. We all felt sorry for her. She just didn’t get it.

And, bless her heart; she never knew what she was missing.

On to oysters. Raw oysters here are so fresh you taste the Gulf of Mexico before you taste the oyster. Or maybe they’re the same thing. Prepare your own cocktail sauce, at the table or bar, and then spend some appetite eating them on the half shell. Again, you don’t need a fork when a correctly shucked oyster will practically slide out of its shell and into your mouth all by itself.

Great seafood here can be just that simple.

Or it can get dressed up in fancy duds and ready to party.

Famous restaurants, uptown, downtown, and back of town daily elevate fish and shellfish from basic boiled beauties to traditional (and untraditional) classics. Catfish can make you sob. Soft shell crabs seem like crispy clouds. Speckled trout, shrimp, pompano, and redfish come blackened, broiled, grilled, sautéed, steamed, sauced and sassy as all get out. Put another way, when it comes to seafood, we Orleanians like to swing all ways. The recipes in this book demonstrate how the low, the high, and the mighty buoyantly co-exist in a dining world that ranges from blue jeans to black tie. With taste buds to match.

Of course, there’s a difference between what a restaurant serves, and making your own. Restaurant chefs have experience, knowledge, and special tricks. No matter. These recipes aren’t written for the professional, although they may make you look like one. Each dish has been home-kitchen tested by real people who are not chefs in real life. We want you to be happy, look good, and be able to duplicate a famous recipe simply and easily right in your own backyard.

Or kitchen.

A final note. If handling fresh fish makes you squeamish, remember what a native Orleanian, and a pretty picky eater herself, once told me: At least seafood doesn’t have eyelashes.

~ Kit Wohl