

Florida Food Fare

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Stone Crabs

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Description: Stone crab claws are high on the list of favored Florida seafood. These crabs have the unusual ability to cast off their legs or pincers if caught by one leg or experience extreme temperature change. The separation always occurs at one of the joints to protect the crab from bleeding. During the life of the crab, the same appendage may be generated three or four times. Claw regeneration to harvestable size is often within 12 months.

Florida law takes advantage of this ability of regeneration by making it illegal to harvest whole stone crabs. One or both of the very powerful black-tipped claws may be removed provided the length of the forearm measures 2 3/4 inches. If not, the claw must be left on the crab and the live stone crab returned to the water. It is also unlawful to remove claws from egg-bearing females.

Availability: Stone crab season opens October 16 and goes through May 14, with harvesting prohibited between May 15 and October 15. Although stone crabs are found along the coast from North Carolina to Mexico, they are commercially landed only in Florida, and only the claws are sold. Cooked stone crab claws freeze beautifully in the shell, making it possible to purchase cooked stone crab claws refrigerated or frozen. They are rarely available throughout the year, even frozen, as demand usually is greater than the supply.

Selection and Care: Freezing or icing raw stone crab claws causes the meat to stick to the inside of the shell. For this reason, they are cooked immediately on landing and are sold cooked. When purchasing cooked stone crab claws, freshness can only be judged on the basis of a mild odor. If you trap or collect your own stone crabs, be sure not to place the claws directly on ice. You may place them in a cooler at a temperature of about 40 degrees F. for a few hours until they can be cooked.

Claws are cooked by placing the crabs in boiling water and heating the water back to a boil. Total cooking time should be 7-8 minutes. Running cold water over the cooked claws is often suggested to insure the meat does not stick to the shells. Store cooked claws in the refrigerator at 32-35degrees F. or packed in ice no longer than 2-3 days. If purchased freshly cooked and frozen in the shell the same day, the shelf life of the claw is about 6 months. The shell protects the meat during freezing so freeze only claws that are intact. Frozen stone crab claws are best when thawed in the refrigerator for 12-18 hours before using.

Nutritional Value: A cooked 3 ounce portion of crab meat contains 60 calories, no fat, 15 gm protein, 45 mg cholesterol, 300 mg sodium, and 4 gm calcium.

Use & Preparation: Because stone crab claw meat is so rich, generally you need purchase only three large claws per person. A good guideline with purchasing crab claws is to allow 1 pound per person. Approximately 2 ½ pounds cooked stone crab claws are required to one pound crabmeat.

To serve: Crack all the sections of the shell with a hammer or a nutcracker and let everyone pick the meat out themselves. You can also crack the claw, then remove the shell and moveable pincer, leaving the meat attached to the remaining pincer. This is the way they are usually served in restaurants. The cooked meat can also be picked from the shell and used in any recipe calling for cooked crabmeat or lobster.

Most people are purists when it comes to stone crab meat and prefer it cold or steamed only long enough to heat it and served with clarified butter, warm lemon butter or this warm Mustard Sauce as a compliment.

Mustard Sauce

1/2 cup lite sour cream	1/2 teaspoon parsley flakes
1 1/2 teaspoons prepared mustard	1/8 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons melted butter or margarine	

Combine all ingredients. Heat at a very low temperature, just until warm, stirring occasionally. Do not boil. Makes approximately 2/3 cup sauce.