

INTRODUCTION

RECIPE WRITING

BY BROOKE ROLLINS

STEAMED MARYLAND BLUE CRABS

3 cups water
2 bottles of beer (use a pale lager or an American style ale)
1 cup white vinegar
1 cup Old Bay seasoning
1/4 cup + 2 tbsp of rock salt or coarse sea salt
24 live Maryland blue crabs
Serves 4 to 6

1. In a medium bowl, combine Old Bay seasoning and salt, set aside.
2. In an extra large stock pot fitted with a steaming rack, combine water, beer, and vinegar, and bring to a boil. Make sure that the rack is raised 6 to 8 inches from the bottom of the pot so that the crabs do not touch the boiling liquid (you can use bricks to raise the rack, if necessary).
3. Using tongs (the crabs will pinch bare hands), layer crabs on the steaming rack and generously shower the spice mixture over each layer. Reserve a scant quarter cup of the spice mixture for serving.
4. Cover the pot tightly, and place a heavy brick on the lid to prevent crabs from escaping.
5. Boil over high heat until crabs are a bright orangey red, about 30-35 minutes.
6. Serve on a newspaper-covered table with wooden mallets, paring knives, drawn butter, and the remaining spice mixture.



A recipe is a set of instructions, properly ordered and formatted according to familiar constraints. Almost entirely oriented toward helping its user perform a task (perhaps for the first time, perhaps for the four-hundredth), the genre is above all functional. Located at the very top, the title of the dish allows the cook to organize the recipe according to type: appetizers, sides, main courses, meats, seafood, desserts, and the like. The text that follows lists every ingredient needed to begin and then provides a step-by-step procedure for bringing the dish to completion. It even suggests how to and how many might enjoy what's just been created, all written in as economical a language as possible.

But beyond the economy and the instruction-manual style prose, a recipe does much more. It weaves a narrative full of color, taste, texture, and sound. It promises reward and evokes indelible memories. It alludes to a coming sensual experience, one possibly shared with family and friends. Like an engrossing novel, a recipe opens by setting a scene. It moves through differentiated stages of incompleteness (perhaps even adventure) and then resolves the tension with a satisfying—if predictable—conclusion, hinting towards the pleasurable experience of having completed something and of enjoying the rewards of this labor.

The story that this recipe tells is of my childhood. I grew up in south central Pennsylvania, just 30 miles north of the Maryland border, and eating Chesapeake Bay blue crabs—so named for the beautiful blue hue on their



legs—was a summer tradition that connected our family to my grandmother's Baltimore roots. From net to table, blue crabs offered adventures that even today—nearly 30 years after my first encounter with them—tie me to my family and my home.

In part because this recipe includes live quarry, the act of preparing the meal involved a certain amount of risk. True to their name, crabs do not possess a yielding or pleasant demeanor, and the last thing they want to do is enter a cauldron for the steam to end all steams. So, rather than placing the angry fare into the pot with bare hands, we had to use tongs—the surrogate version of the crabs' own small but powerful pincers. Without them, our hands were vulnerable to their pointed, fine-toothed claws. And beyond this possibility of injury, there was the none-too-small matter of actually killing dinner ourselves. Having mustered the nerve to deliver the crabs to their final destination, we were

a bit jarred to discover that the captives near the top of the steamer had found the strength to dismantle the lid and make a break for freedom. Eventually we learned to put a heavy brick on the lid, preventing the otherwise inevitable escapes.

Despite all of this excitement, cooking the crabs was just the start of the experience—a unique challenge lay in store once the meal hit the newspaper-covered table. After the longest 30-minutes of my young life, we removed the tightly sealed lid to see that the crabs' beautiful blue-green shells had been transformed into a vivid rusty red. We turned the crabs out onto the middle of the table and began the feast, which was far more than a simple act of eating: it was an hours-long celebration of the arrival of summer.

Eating a steamed blue crab is anything but simple. In fact, I would hazard that the sublime deliciousness of its meat is directly proportional to the difficulty of accessing it. The ultimate prize is the meat of the backfin—the place where the crab's back swimming legs meet its body. Here you'll find the most succulent meat with the most consistent and dense texture. But this I would always save for last. It was the reward for expertly removing—sometimes with my bare hands, sometimes with my paring knife and wooden mallet, sometimes with my teeth—all of the meat from every joint of the crab's spidery legs and from every crevice of its side body.

Picking crabs is a game of patience and precision, and because it can take hours to make your way through a whole meal's worth, the practice allows for that rare and comfortable sort of family bonding that can only occur in the midst of a shared project. Our project while eating crabs was to get every last bit of meat they had to offer. Even then—in the early 1980s—the Chesapeake Bay had suffered environmental damage, and the crabs were in such demand that they were often over harvested. We couldn't have them often, and that they were a rare treat made expert picking all the more important.

The aftermath of a crab feast is an epic mess, and it usually comes with a vague feeling of hunger—blue crabs don't have all that much meat to offer, and if you spread the eating out over several hours it's possible to emerge feeling ready for dinner. Covered with small paper-like cuts from the occasional unyielding shell, our hands burned from the spice, and the carnage left on the table (including discarded shells, scraped out gills or “devil's fingers,” and left behind digestive tracts) is something that no food magazine would ever feature in a color spread. And yet I can attest that to survey this ostensibly unpalatable scene is to know that you have eaten well.

That I learned at age six a process that’s about as complicated as driving a car is something I’m still strangely proud of. I’ve lived in several different parts of the country since leaving home, and one constant is that I can pick a crab as well as anyone on the Eastern Seaboard. This single recipe connects me to a lifetime of memories, binds me to a locale, and ties me to my family. Yet it is merely a gesture toward the singularly important place that food holds in our lives. Far more than providing sustenance, food defines us. It connects us with people and places. It sets us in relation to others. It calls up important questions of sustainability and production, of ethics and responsibility.

For all these reasons, food gives us a variety of rich opportunities for writing and research, and we have designed this book so that you might read, think, and compose with all of these considerations and questions in mind. We open *Food* with a piece called “The Cooking Ape,” an interview with anthropologist Richard Wrangham, who argues that mastering fire and using it to cook played a central role in our evolution. Against this backdrop, we hope you will see in the collection of readings and images a complex yet entirely accessible narrative about the variety of ways that food sustains, inspires, and shapes us. This narrative is woven together from personal stories about growing, preparing, and eating food; from reflections about restaurants and celebrity chefs; and from reports on and arguments about the politics of food.

In addition to these written and visual texts, *Food* includes research, invention, and composing prompts that will help you add your voice to the ongoing conversations about a variety of food-related issues. As you read the selections and work through the corresponding prompts, we hope you will keep an eye trained beyond the page. Indeed, many of the prompts will allow you to link up, not only with your classmates, but also with multi-genre texts and ongoing food, farm, restaurant, and food media related projects. And you’ll be doing more than writing here: prompts and other assignments in the book will encourage you to explore various modes of communication—by asking you to write scripts and produce videos, for example; to develop presentations; to conduct primary and secondary research; and to analyze and explain menus and food production practices.

One good way to get started would be to try out the slice of life assignment below. Begin your writing about food by doing some “recipe writing” of your own. Choose a recipe from your own life and explore the ways that food helps define you.



Begin by finding a favorite family recipe (call home, look in your family recipe box or file folder, or remember a meal that you or one of your family members prepared regularly and write it into recipe form with the help of some online research). Once you've found your recipe, place it at the beginning of a new document and think of it as a starting place—the first few lines of a vivid story you will tell. From there, illustrate and bring to life the implied narrative of the recipe in essay form. Look to each formulaic element of the recipe and think about amplifying each of these elements in your essay:

- **RECIPE TITLE:** Does the title point to a specific place, context, or ingredient that means something to you?
- **NUMBER OF PEOPLE SERVED:** In the context of your life and experience, who are the people eating this dish (or who might they be)? How do you remember or imagine this group of people together as they eat the meal? What are their relationships to each other? How do these people come together over food? What role does the food play in bringing them together?
- **INGREDIENT LIST:** What materials and ingredients do you need to complete the recipe? What sensual elements do you see here? What are the sights, tastes, smells, and sounds hiding in this simple list? Are there any unique components you need to explain to an outside audience?
- **SERVING SUGGESTIONS:** How is this meal served? Describe the look, smell, and taste, and point out the small details. (For example, what dishes were used to serve it? Did you eat it inside or outside?) Think, too, of the individuals eating the meal. Where were they sitting? Do they enjoy it? Hate it? Is it new to them? What are the interesting responses?

Once you have developed notes based on these invention suggestions, write an essay that vividly dramatizes and tells the story of your recipe to an audience who did not experience the meal with you. In other words, write an essay that invites us to your table. Write an essay that uses these elements of the recipe to tell readers something about you.

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