

## Cooking as a Family Experience

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For many years during my childhood only white wing dove, deer, javelina, crab, and fish filled our freezer, for my father and my brother were hunters and fishermen who delivered the fruits of their recreation for us to eat. My mother, not a gourmet cook, relied on help from women's magazines and cookbooks to guide her through the rituals needed to prepare whatever the men brought home. It was not always a successful venture.

One day in December, my father proudly presented my mother with twelve ducks to prepare which was a new challenge. Unlike the tiny dove breasts that she marinated and served after each September hunting expedition, these were unfamiliar game. My mother had read a recent article in the Ladies Home Journal that suggested that before plucking and storing, one should hang ducks for two weeks in a dark place such as a garage. Looking back, I'm not sure what the effect was to be, but my mother thought it was a good idea. Perhaps she merely wanted to avoid the cooking process as long as possible. My father had grave misgivings, but the LHJ was not to be ignored, so they hung from the garage rafters the twelve Mallards. The ropes circled their feet and held them anchored at the farthest darkest part of the garage. Fortunately, our garage was detached, located a distance from the main part of the house.



We waited for the transformation designed to turn these feathered creatures into succulent meals. Day one and two saw little change, but three and four brought many. For by then the flies had discovered our bounty. At first there were only some and then there were many. Within a short time maggots followed flies which led to a serious re-examination of the article's instructions which clearly contained no mention of flies and maggots. Nor did it discuss the odor which became a problem of neighborly proportions. I'm sure the folks living on either side of us were not impressed with our experiment any more than they were when we blew out their transformer later during the Tesla Coil venture.

Within a week there was considerable conflict between my parents over the proper course of action. I don't know what finally brought the discussion to a resolution. However, long before the two weeks ended, the project was terminated and the twelve badly decomposed ducks were placed out of their misery and we were placed out of ours.

Upon reflection it was decided that a significant variable had not been taken into consideration. We lived in deep south Texas (McAllen) near the Mexican border which felt no winter chill. Examination of the magazine made it clear that the authors were Yankees for whom December meant frozen temperatures, no flies, and duck that could be safely hung and seasoned. For obvious reasons, we didn't try this again upon the next batch of duck that arrived at our home, and I think my father always felt a sense of loss at the failure of this experiment.



Another disaster did not involve game but instead critters from the sea. We moved from the tip of Texas to the coastal town of Corpus Christi where crabs were plentiful and easy to catch. The glory of crabbing was that seldom did a crab escape with our bait and the frequency of "bites" was often enough that boredom was never an issue. We learned to love these Saturday expeditions collecting as many as 100 crabs which we took home still live at the end of the day. We quickly learned to use homemade crab hooks made of shower curtain rings attached to heavy string on which we hooked chicken necks and other leftover meat scraps. We sat on local piers and dropped our crabbing equipment over the edge not having to wait long for the anticipated tug. We quickly pulled up the line finding a crab attached to the chicken neck.

The crab seemed unaware of his fate, so before he could release his hold my father would swing a deep net under the animal and wait for him to drop to his fate. Once in the net, the crab was deposited into a waiting bucket punched with holes and returned to the bay until we were ready to leave. When we had gathered enough for a feast, the collected crabs would be placed in a galvanized tub used in the off season to bathe our dog.

Cooking these dangerous looking crustaceans was our initial challenge, but we learned the ritual after only a single mistrial. This time the Better Homes and Garden Cookbook was consulted. It made clear that the process was simple. All we had to do was to drop the crabs into boiling water until they turned pink. Easy.

So my mother placed the huge aluminum spaghetti pot on the stove filled with water and waited for it to come to a boil. After long minutes, the bubbles were active and we brought in the tub filled with scratching, clawing crabs all trying to return to their home waters. It was quite exciting to be so near animals that looked as if they could detach a finger with a single claw and yet be at a distance safe enough to ensure this wasn't going to happen. I fear that we may have delighted in tormenting them with hopes of reaching one of our outstretched hands that we then quickly retracted.

My mother reached down with a long handled pair of tongs and gingerly transferred first one and then another into the pot. Very soon she had six or eight of these crabs bathed in the water. And for a moment there was no response. But within a short time the temperature of the water made an impression on our future meal and they did not appreciate our invitation to join us for dinner. Our trusted cookbook had failed to provide one essential piece of information. Crabs do not like boiling water and they will leave as quickly as possible.

Within moments we had eight very mad crabs crawling over the top of the pot, onto our counter and then to the floor. It was our worst nightmare and we regretted having teased them hoping they wouldn't remember our earlier inhumanity. We danced about screeching trying to avoid their pincers as my mother madly swatted at them with a long handled spoon as if to discipline them for their misbehavior.

The sight of the three of us being attacked by a mob of furious crabs made an impression on my father as he walked in. The two adults succeeded in returning the crabs to the original tub. My brother and I contributed only our hysteria. When quiet returned, my mother once again dropped the uncooperative animals into the pot, but this time she had a lid ready to prevent their escape. And by the next Saturday my father had built a contraption to boil water outside figuring that AWOL crabs would be less of a calamity thrashing about in the grass rather than our kitchen floor.

We enjoyed crab for many seasons and became adept at the process of catching, cooking, and shelling. I have fond memories of a picnic table covered with newspaper and piles of fresh crab legs, which we dipped into sweet rich melted butter when such things were not considered a dietary taboo. But we always enjoyed them the most when we retold the story of the time the crabs tried to escape their fate.