

Crayfish Tales
by
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CRAYFISH – A ROYAL TREAT

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For years I have believed crayfish to be food for kings. Recently, looking into the history of Swedish kings, I discovered this to be literally true.

Native crayfish in Sweden are often referred to as the ‘Noble’ crayfish. Being of nobility puts a person next door to royalty, and Swedish royalty has long liked the noble crayfish. Historical archives are full of items that show that Swedish royalty enjoyed crayfish hundreds of years ago. The name ‘Noble crayfish’ actually originated in the German expression ‘Edel Krebs’ which implied that crayfish were either excellent or high-born. Whatever the real meaning, crayfish became a royal treat.

Yes, indeed, crayfish are, and have been, a royal delicacy. At least in northern Europe where kings, queens, princes and other nobles found that crayfish were savory at their tables. Before the 16th century, crayfish in the Scandinavian countries were not thought of as food or even fit to eat. Eventually, however, the monarchs of Denmark and Sweden seem to have adopted crayfish as a culinary dish. Records tell us that in 1504 crayfish were ordered to the table of Queen Christine of Denmark from a supplier in Lübeck, Germany.

And in Sweden, during King Gustaf Vasa’s reign in the 1500s, crayfish became an attraction at the royal house. Gustav Vasa had several sons, some eventually became kings who are historically recorded as being ‘friends of the crayfish’.

Erik XIV, the eldest son, was a modern king for his time. He was alert for interesting things around Europe. For a while he wooed the ‘virgin queen’ of England, Elizabeth I. To his chagrin, she turned him down. Returning to Sweden he used his managerial talents to expand Sweden’s political role in Europe.

Ruling his country took much of his time, but he also enjoyed having the best of all things around him, castles with admirers, beautiful women and plenty of good food. Among the latter was crayfish. King Erik’s favorite castle was the Kalmar Castle. Like so many castles of its time, it had a moat. And as we all know, a moat is an area of water surrounding a castle. Probably mostly intended to prevent intruders, it could also be used for raising crayfish. And that is what the king did.

Crayfish were well known in Sweden long before King Erik’s time, but before his time,

historical records of eating them are rare in Sweden. But crayfish were there. Among village names dating back to the 11th century, we find Swedish names such as 'Kräftemåla' and 'kräftgölen', all names that indicate the presence of crayfish (kräftor) in the area.

But if we go further back in time, to Greece, for instance, we'll find that Aristotle mentioned crayfish in some of his learned works. Going even further, to Mesopotamia, the country between Tigris and Euphrates, we find records showing that the old biblical inhabitants of Abraham's time had big crayfish parties under the palm trees. Assyrians and Babylonians were so fond of crayfish they named a constellation the CRAB. So crayfish have been around for a while.

Back to the royal food. King Erik had a brother, half brother actually, who was also fond of crayfish. As a young man, brother Johan became duke of the Finnish areas that belonged to Sweden. And there were lots of crayfish in Finland. Still are. One time, duke Johan of Finland told his underlings at the castle to hurry on down to Germany to purchase a load of crayfish for his use. Crayfish were transplanted into lakes and moats around his castle, and soon they were called noble or 'Edel Krebs' as they were called in Germany. In orders to his body guard, Per Eriksson, Duke Johan authorizes him to make sure nobody but the king's men will catch crayfish in the Upsala river. Obviously not only kings and dukes found the crayfish to be a culinary attraction in those days.

But the elder brother Erik was the real crayfish lover in the family. When preparing for the wedding of princess Anna, he wrote and commanded the manager of one of his castles to go out and fish for crayfish wherever he could find them. He was to bring them up to Stockholm for his own use, for his many guests and for all the people expected at the princess Anna's, his sister's, wedding.

King Erik lived during the renaissance, so we may well call him a renaissance monarch. As such he introduced not only crayfish to Sweden, but also the custom of eating with a fork. Maybe even the crayfish knife? He even taught Swedes not to wipe their hands and mouths on the table cloth.

Gustav Vasa's third son also eventually became king called Charles IX. Even this Vasa king showed his interest in crayfish by developing crayfish hatcheries by his castle at Gripsholm, west of Stockholm.

Later we also read that Swedish Queen Kristina had a taste for crayfish. Among the preparations for her coronation in 1649 a large amount of crayfish were prepared. And her father, Gustav II Adolf, who liked food and fought for Protestantism in Germany during the 30-year war, ate crayfish according to those who kept track of his royal eating habits.

While the royal families of Europe enjoyed eating their crayfish, the simpler folks had their qualms about them. Linnaeus, the renowned biologist, decided that crayfish were insects, and at that time, at least, you just did not eat insects. And the lowly peasants had

their qualms too. After all, the bible tells us not to eat anything that has ‘many legs’. In spite of the biblical no-no about crustaceans, Catholics in Germany enjoyed crayfish highly as they considered them non-meat products that could be eaten during lent. A monastery in Bavaria shows us records of the consumption of over 30,000 crayfish one year, and an old German cookbook from 1485 had five pages of crayfish recipes. An Austrian book named Kaiser Maximilian’s fishing book, printed in 1499, shows clearly in one of its pictures how crayfish are caught in large quantities and deposited in an enormous barrel drawn by 4 horses. As a castle-like building in the picture indicates, those crayfish most surely went to some noble families if not even to the Kaiser himself.

But it took until the middle of the 19th century before crayfish catching became popular among simpler folks, at least in Sweden. At first the rural population finally found a way of adding to their meager incomes by catching and selling crayfish to the well-to-dos in the cities. But as they watched the upper crust enjoying the crayfish they had caught for them, they began to eat them also. And in spite of what the bible said, they found them palatable.

So finally not only the royals were eating crayfish. Everybody started eating crayfish. So much, finally, that the number of crayfish in some lakes started dropping noticeably. Restrictions began to appear, and soon it was ruled that crayfish could only be caught during the months of August and September. One apparent reason for this was to avoid catching and killing the pregnant crayfish, a habit that soon could deplete their numbers.

Then something drastic happened in Europe. And in Sweden it became a catastrophe. The crayfish plague arrived. Some time before the start of the 20th century, it is surmised, a ship from the US arrived in Italy with a large ballast of water that also contained crayfish. Unfortunately these crayfish were infected with the deadly fungal disease that kills crayfish. The plague quickly spread all over Europe, and in Sweden it arrived in a load of Finnish crayfish. Soon the effect of the disease became apparent, and some of the most durable and productive lakes started showing up with fewer and soon even no crayfish.

Regulations were implemented to prevent further spread of the plague such as disinfecting crayfish traps but to little avail. The Swedish crayfish population plummeted. Soon the only way left for the crayfish hungry Swedes became importing the beloved crustaceans from other countries that had not been affected. Turkey, Spain and even China and the USA started supplying crayfish to Swedes who soon found that they could buy imported crayfish cheaper than the remaining noble crayfish in the dying lakes.

Then the tide turned. Some fishing experts figured out that the American signal crayfish from California was resistant to the fungus disease that had killed off so many of the noble crayfish. Large quantities of the signal crayfish were transplanted into Swedish lakes starting during the 1970s. Soon these crayfish, although actually infected with the fungal disease, started to increase in numbers. In spite of being infected with the disease, they were resistant to the plague and they survived and multiplied. But the remaining noble crayfish died off even faster.

Today Swedes, be they members of the royal family or the middle class, gorge on their new found friends, the American signal crayfish. Many lakes now produce as much, if not more, crayfish than in the heyday of the noble crayfish. Imports of crayfish from other countries have decreased while crayfish parties with colored lights, bibs and funny hats under a rising moon have increased. And the regulations that limited these festivals to August and September have been discarded. Now you can catch, cook and eat crayfish any time you want, something that the introduction of the freezer helped change.

The average Swede eats more crayfish than the average American. That doesn't hold true for Cajuns, though. Go down to Cajun land in Louisiana, and you will see enormous amounts of crayfish - they call them crawfish - caught and consumed cooked the Cajun way with plenty of spices and served on tables covered with newspapers. The southern habit of feasting on crawfish is spreading and the custom of getting together for a lively Crawfish Boil is popping up all over the United States.

For much more information about crayfish, how to catch, how to cook and how to eat them, go to Trapper Arne's web site www.TrapperArne.com. There you will also find the traps to fill your own larder with these nutritious, free and tasty crustaceans.

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