

**Crayfish Tales**  
by  
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## **COOKING CRAYFISH**

*Learn How the Cajuns and the Swedes do it*

*#12*

*By Trapper Arne*

*(1876 words)*

Lucky you who have a mess of crayfish to cook and a tasty feast to look forward to. Just back from the lakes, huh? Living in Payson, that means one of the Rim Lakes. Maybe Woods Canyon Lake or any of the many other lakes that also harbor crayfish ready for a hungry Cajun or Swede. Or other converts.

So there you stand with a cooler full of crawling crayfish and wonder what to do with them. There are two ways of cooking crayfish. Either you cook them the Cajun way with plenty of spices or you cook them like the Swedes with plain salt and maybe some sprigs of fresh dill. And you don't have to be a cook to cook crayfish.

### **Purging Crayfish**

But first of all, don't do anything for a day or two. Nothing? Yes, nothing. But you must keep the live crayfish cool and moist in the meantime, maybe in a cooler or even a refrigerator.

Now, why would you do that? To purge the critters. Purging crayfish, crabs or lobsters too, for that matter, is what cleans out their sand vein; in other words, their large intestine. If you don't, the intestine along the top of the tail, will lie there black, fat and sassy. If you cook them without purging first, and that's all right too, you can pull out the intestine just before you eat the crayfish tail. It's quick and easy.

But many of us don't like to see that black intestine, so here is what you can do. Leave the crayfish in the cooler or other container for a day or two while you pamper them with moisture – not water – and cool temperatures. What happens now is simply that they go to the bathroom, so to speak, and after a day, two days for sure, their intestine turns clear and you can forget about it.

Some believe in purging the crayfish by keeping them in salty water for a while. My experience tells me that doesn't work.

### **Rinsing**

Whichever way you choose, rinse crayfish well before boiling. And I mean well. Let them soak in water for a minute or two and then drain the water. Repeat a few times until the water is clear. Then, and only then, start the boiling. And make sure they are all alive

before cooking. That's imperative for all shell fish.

### **Prepare the Boil**

Now, as I said before, there are two ways of boiling crayfish, either Cajun or Swedish style. (Maybe I should say Scandinavian or even European as most Europeans cook their crayfish the Swedish way.) Regardless of which method you choose, add enough water to the pot to cover the crayfish whether you cook ten, fifty or a hundred at a time.

### **How Much Salt?**

First add salt to the water. My rule of thumb says ½ cup (8 TBS) of salt per gallon of water. That's the same saltiness as ¼ cup (4 TBS) of salt per half a gallon (2 quarts). Remember that it is the salt vs. water relationship that is important. How many crayfish you put into your pot makes little difference.

### **Zatarain's Crab Boil**

If you decide to go the Cajun style, add a 3 oz package of Zatarain's Crab Boil for each 3 quarts of water. You may want more or less of these ingredients once you develop a taste for it.

If you cook the crayfish the Swedish way, you're in luck; simplicity is the key. You don't have to add anything but salt to make crayfish taste their natural best. If you want to really go ethnically Scandinavian, add a handful of fresh dill and maybe also a bottle of dark beer. Some say a lump of sugar adds something, but I have my doubts.

After the water has boiled for a couple of minutes, fish out the dill, and dump in the crayfish right after you just rinsed them one more time.

### **Adding the Crayfish**

There are many theories and opinions about how to add crayfish to boiling water. No matter how you approach it, it sounds like a pretty dismal way to go. Some suggest you just put in a few crayfish at a time and let the water quickly come back to a boil before adding anymore. Some specify they be plunged in head first. Some even suggest you put the crayfish in while the water is cool and let them slowly get used to the warming water. If that is possible. If I were a crayfish I wouldn't like it much no matter how it was done.

Personally, I dump all the crayfish into roiling water after which I bring the water back to boiling as fast as possible. Recently I purchased a wrought iron propane gas cooker on a tripod. With a container of propane in the garage, I can boil water amazingly fast.

### **Crayfish – Hot or Cold?**

Once the water with the crayfish is back to boiling, most recipes suggest cooking them at a roil for about 7 minutes; not just until their shells are red, which happens much sooner. Then cool off the pot as fast as possible. Here comes a major difference between Scandinavian and Cajun cooking. Swedes eat their crayfish cold, not warm. And there is a reason for this which I have verified many times. Crayfish taste better after steeping in

the cooking brine for A COUPLE OF DAYS. To do this, the brine has to be cold. Thus, cold crayfish taste better. With a liberal amount of Cajun spices, you may not notice that difference.

Just after I turn off the heat under the crayfish kettle, I put a fan on it to cool it off enough to put it in the fridge. An hour or so is enough.

### **Cajun Hot Crawfish**

Now to the CAJUN style crayfish cooking. As I am not a Cajun nor am used to eating crayfish warm and spicy, maybe I should not write this section of the article. But I can read, and there are numerous recipes that tell me, and you, how to cook crayfish Cajun style.

Prepare the water and salt the way described above for Swedish cooking. If you use the Zatarain's Crab boil, no need for other spices. The crayfish – maybe now I should refer to them as crawfish like the Cajuns – will taste great as long as you remember the salt.

### **A Cajun Recipe**

But Cajun crawfish cooking is a bit more complicated. To satisfy most gourmets down South, and many in the North, you may need to boil up a mess of potatoes and corn as well. Here is one of many Internet recipes:

- 5 gallons of water
- 20 lbs crayfish
- 26 ounces of salt (3 cups)
- 6 TBS Cayenne Pepper
- 4 lemons, halved
- 10 bay leaves
- 6 onions
- 12 new potatoes (skins on)
- 6 ears of corn
- ¼ cup olive oil

For this recipe you need a big kettle. As described before, wash and rinse the crayfish well. With water boiling briskly, add crayfish, potatoes, corn and other ingredients. Bring back to boiling and THEN boil for 12-15 minutes. After you turn off the heat, let soak for about five minutes before serving.

### **Eating the Crayfish**

Now for another major difference between Cajun and Swedish style crayfish eating. While the Swedish recipe is simple and the Cajun is more complicated, the eating is the complete opposite. The Swedes make their meal complicated and formal while the Cajuns enjoy their crayfish, excuse me, crawfish, in a very informal way.

### **Swedish Formality**

Swedes sit down at a festive and formal table. Everybody has a plate, fork and,

especially, a crayfish knife. No Swede can eat crayfish without a crayfish knife. In the middle of the table on a large dish are the red-shelled crayfish. According to Swedish ethnic formality, crayfish are lined up orderly on the plate with the biggest, record breaking crayfish, in the center.

Each table setting has glasses to hold beer or wine and, especially the vodka-like akvavit. A special glass holds the important akvavit, also called schnapps.

Usually, all the eaters are dressed up and some are even decorated with bibs and funny, some say silly, paper hats.

### **The Singing Swedes**

There is also music during Swedish crayfish parties. The music consists of songs. Songs specially written for crayfish parties and such. You just can't drink schnapps without first singing. Everybody sings and after a few schnapps and a lot of crayfish, everybody is having a good time. At or under the table...

### **Cajun Informality**

The Cajun party is quite different. It is the epitome of simplicity and spirited camaraderie. Emphasis is on the eating. When Cajun crawfish are ready to eat, warm of course, they are usually poured out on a table covered with paper, often even newspapers. What can be simpler and more efficient than that?

Cajuns at a party don't sit and eat. They stand and eat. Or walk around and talk to other people and enjoy themselves while being informal. If the crawfish are properly purged, all you have to do is tear off the tail, squeeze it in a certain way and out pops the meat into your mouth if you know how to do it right. If you are a macho Cajun you also suck the heads with a big slurp to savor the spices in the Zatarain's crab boil. And when the paper plate is empty, you just go back to the newspaper bedecked table and get some more. The drinking is up to the individual, but beer seems to be a favorite among crawfish eaters.

### **... and the Cajun Music**

At a Cajun crawfish boil there must be music. And the music is of course the special kind you only find in Cajun country. At a Louisiana crawfish boil, the music is the foot stomping Zydeco kind with instruments of fiddles, accordion and the frottoir – aka a rubboard - with additional rhythm provided by guitar and drums. You just can't eat Cajun crawfish without this kind of French and African inspired music.

### **Crayfish Festivals**

My most recent crayfish boil was a festival at a crayfish lake. No wonder the mode of eating was Cajun. We all walked around and squeezed tails and sucked heads to the recorded Zydeco music of Cajun land. At another festival at Camp Verde, Arizona, tables were furnished and tables were covered with plain paper and everybody had a great time with a Zydeco band playing. One musician even had a frottoir that I saw for the first time.

OK, a frottoir is a corrugated metal rubboard hanging from a musician's neck. As a percussion instrument it is played with a bottle opener pulled up and down the board with a washboardy rhythmic sound.

### **Crayfish – A Gustatorial Rite**

Crayfish are small. At least compared to lobsters. But they taste the same and the price is right. At least if you caught them yourself. I have designed a web site where I talk about nothing but crayfish. Read it and learn about crayfish trapping, cooking and eating and more. ([WWW.TrapperArne.com](http://WWW.TrapperArne.com)) To really fill your cravings for crayfish, you may want to eat 15-20 at a sitting. It takes a while with all the peeling and fussing, so if you are desperately hungry, consider a hamburger first. Eating crayfish is a gustatorial rite, and should be enjoyed in the company of good friends in a friendly atmosphere.

Try it, you'll like it.

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