



## the CRAYFISH TALE

### CRAYFISH ON a FESTIVE TABLE

Home from the lakes with over 100 lbs of crayfish, what do you do? If you are me, you prepare for a heck of a big crayfish party. Swedes call it a kräftskiva. Cajuns call it a crawfish boil.

Whatever you call it, it could become the highlight of the year. It does for me, and I have had those highlights, with few intermissions, since I saw the light of day in a land of the midnight sun.

Before you start preparing for your crayfish party, you must decide what taste buds you want to entice. My ancestors and I vote for the dilly taste you get when cooking crays in a salty brine with handfuls of dill thrown in. Fortunately for me, my garden has plenty of dill that I sow early in the spring so the stalks will be tall and full of seeds by party time.

But should you happen to be from Louisiana, and especially if you are Cajun with ancestors from Canadian Acadia, then you may abide by the traditional recipes that include just about everything but the kitchen sink. To be more exact, Zatarain's or Slap Ya Mama's crab boil which contains, among other things, salt, dextrose, oleoresin paprika, ascorbic acid, citric acid, black pepper, cayenne pepper, thyme, oregano plus MSG (monosodium glutamate), lemon juice, sugar, spices and black pepper

However, as that concoction is not enough, most Cajun inspired crawfish cookers add to the boil; lemon halves, onions, smoked sausages, mushrooms, small red or new potatoes, ears of corn on the cob, and top it off with garlic. No space left for the kitchen sink...

A Swedish crayfish boil consists of water, salt and dill. Yes, that's all. How simple can you get? And I love that smell and taste.

Some extravagant Scandahoovians may also add a bottle of beer to the boil and maybe even a lump of sugar. But that's it.

Swedes say; taste, like the rear, is divided. (Smaken liksom baken, delad är.)

So as soon as I returned from the lake with my catch, I dragged out my old turkey and crayfish cooker hiding under the work bench, connected the propane tank and filled the pot with 3 gallons of water, salt and dill.

I prepared the 100 largest crayfish for the first of several boils. My mother instilled in me the knowledge that crays have to be well rinsed before cooking. And all have to be alive, or at least have given up their crayfish ghosts within a half hour or so of their final exit. (Anything longer than that may mean toxic deterioration.)

Some crayfish preps include long dissertations about purging. 'Drop the crays in a kiddie pool,' they say, 'and sprinkle them with salt for a few minutes.'

Whoever wrote that probably believes it works, but I'll tell you otherwise. It does not. Best is instead to leave the crays alone, alive, for about two days, and they will all have gone to the bathroom. Better still, ignore the whole schmeer about purging, cook the crays and then, before you eat the tail, pick out the dark sand vein on top and dispose of it. Simple and easy, and 100 % effective.

For a crayfish skiva you must have guests. So as soon I got the cooking going, I grabbed the phone and invited my dearest and most Swedish crayfish eating friends. Good old John who plays the piano, Anders with the accordion, Nils with his clarinet and Stig who knows the best drinking songs. All with spouses or significant others. Kerstin drove all the way from Rocky Point in Mexico as she won't miss any crayfish invitation. No pleading necessary.

My dear wife said, 'where do we put them all?' Our guest apartment was large enough for the females, but the males had to bunk in the garage on military cots after we had moved out the cars. But the aroma of hundreds of cooked crayfish still lingered.

Cajuns also believe in simplicity. After the crays are cooked, they, and the corn and the potatoes and the mushrooms and the sausages, are all poured out over well read versions of the New York Times or Wall Street Journals on the nearest long table at hand.

Now, the time Swedes gained by cooking crayfish the simple way, they

lose when preparing their crayfish table. My ancestors make a big deal out of a crayfish party, and a kräftskiva is often the biggest event of the year, next to Christmas.

My crayfish table must be festive. No newspapers here. Preferably a colorful table cloth with pictures of red crayfish. Colorful bibs and hats with a large man-in-the-moon paper lantern in a window. Lots of paper towels. All guests at the table have their own place settings with plenty of space for ten to fifteen crayfish. Each setting has the ubiquitous crayfish knife, a must at a real crayfish party. On the table within reach of all guests are serving platters heaped with red crayfish embellished with sprigs of dill crowns. At a real fancy setup, you will also find little saucers with water to clean your salty fingers after fighting the cray shells.

Crayfish are the main item, but a typical skiva also includes cheeses, herrings sprats and breads of all sorts, especially toasted. But a crayfish skiva would not be a crayfish skiva without one of the most hallowed items of Scandinavia, schnapps. Also called akvavit or snaps in their special little steamy shot glasses on tall stems. A cray party without snaps and beer is not worth going to.

With the snaps goes singing. My cray parties always include song sheets where guests can follow the words of the most popular songs. At some parties you just can't drink unless you first sing. John and Anders helped keep the singers in tune. I always sing off key.

So, whether you go with the dilly Swedes or the spicy Cajuns, you'll enjoy your crayfish party. Just make sure you catch your crays with traps from Trapper Arne.

