



**The
CRAYFISH TALE
By TRAPPER ARNE**

CRAYFISH AND HOW PEOPLE EAT THEM

To some it's the catching of the crayfish that is the most important phase. To others it's the eating. Over the years I have touched on those subjects quite often, both here in newsletters and also on my website. Being a Swede by birth, maybe I have dwelt on that country's crayfish traditions more than I should, so this time I will talk about some other countries' crustaceous eating habits.

Some eat them hot, some eat them cold. Whichever temperature range you prefer, depends on how you were taught to eat them as a child. If you were always served warm crayfish, that becomes your preference. If on the other hand, you were a Swede or a Finn, e.g., you have trouble finding any better way than to eat crayfish cold. My own daughter-in-law will not eat crayfish unless they are hot, or at least warm. But certainly not cold.

I can tell you a good reason to serve them cold. After crayfish are cooked in water that also includes salt and spices, whether it be dill for my crayfish or Zatarain's spices for yours, here is something you should know. Crayfish, after they are cooked, soak up the seasonings in the water, the brine, and after soaking for a couple of days, taste noticeably better. So if you like crayfish as tasty and good as possible, you will let them soak in the brine for at least two days. But you can't leave crayfish in warm water for two days or they will spoil. So you keep them in the fridge during the soaking process. And then you serve them cold! Unless you want to go through the bother of heating them up again just before serving. And I don't. And millions of Swedes and Finns don't. Try it some day.

The Cajun style of eating crawfish on newspaper bedecked tables has been covered in my newsletters before. And that tradition, with warm crayfish boiled with potatoes, corn and assorted spices to say nothing of hot dogs and God knows what, has been adopted all over the United States and is well known to most of us. While some people prefer to eat crayfish offered whole and unshelled on plates at festive tables, there are numerous recipes using only the crayfish tail and the crayfish fat. One of my own favorite crayfish dishes is the étouffée, which is a delightful presentation of rice smothered with crawfish or other seafood.

But let's look at some other countries and their customs. In the antiquity, in southern Europe, they had a rather cruel way of preparing the crayfish, roasting them live in a frying pan or even barbequing them on glowing embers. Fortunately, that habit has disappeared in favor of some more humane methods. Acceptable to us humans, that is.

In France a guest may be offered crayfish fried in a frying pan after being rolled in a mixture of egg and flour after which they were sizzled in the pan. They called it 'Ecrevisse a la cotelette'. A rather messy affair, I'd say.

Crayfish eating became popular in France during the 19th century. The Parisian burghers took a fancy for crayfish and a fashion developed which now spread north into Germany and Scandinavia. It did not take long before the waters around Paris were emptied of crayfish and French food connoisseurs had to look across their borders for this delicacy. Germany became their source for crayfish and soon Berlin became the

center for the crayfish trade. In Germany they had eaten crayfish for years. Often quoted is the information about how Catholic monks at a monastery in Bavaria consumed large quantities during the fasting period of Lent. Obviously because crayfish were supposed to be non-meat creatures and thus acceptable by the church. In some areas crayfish eating became so popular that some city ordinances prohibited giving servants crayfish more often than once a week.

What do crayfish and oysters have in common? Not much, you might say. But in a hundred year old German article about crayfish I find to my amusement that while Germans ruled out oysters in all months except those with an R in them, they ruled in crayfish in months that **did** have an R in them. That means most Germans, and the rest of the Europeans, gladly went for crayfish in September, October and November. But what about December and January? There aren't many crayfish traipsing around in any water during those cold months. Finally, continues the article, crayfish became so rare in Germany that they started importing them from Finland and Russia.

In today's Germany, crayfish are eaten warm and with cumin seeds, often in soups, while their neighbors to the north prefer them cold and with dill. But that was not always the case. The cold crayfish habit is a relatively modern custom in Sweden as historical records show that warm crays used to be the norm when served at the royal banquets of the Wasa kings.

If you only eat crayfish tails that someone else has shelled for you, you are missing part of the fun. Shelling the crays at the table becomes a ritual to some people, like me. To me crayfish should be served whole and in their shells. If you like finger foods you are in luck. Few dishes are more finger-foody than eating unshelled crayfish. But part of this is plain tradition. Many traditional crayfish eaters not only savor what's under the shell of the cray, but also what's in the claws. (Signal crayfish have large and meaty claws, more so than the red swamp crawfish). Way up in the heads of the cray you'll find some tasty crayfish butter to place on your sandwich at your plate side. Sure, the tail is the **Pièce de résistance**, as the French culinary says. Some can not wait while building up a sandwich chockfull of crayfish meat.

Then there are those who also want to let everyone else at the table see how many – or few – crayfish they have eaten. They line up all the savored and sucked heads along the edge of the plate until it is clear to all that you are both a connoisseur and a meticulous one at that. When the assembled sandwich on the side is ready, everybody at the table admires it before the owner devours it to the tune of schnapps drinking songs.

Well, to each his own.

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