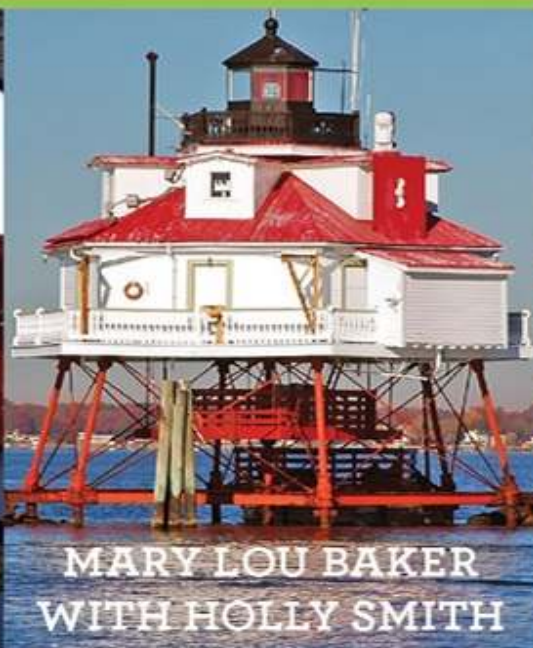




SEAFOOD LOVER'S

CHESAPEAKE BAY

Restaurants, Markets, Recipes & Traditions



MARY LOU BAKER
WITH HOLLY SMITH





Restaurants, Markets, Recipes & Traditions

FIRST EDITION

Mary Lou Baker with Holly Smith



Guilford, Connecticut



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Profiles of Old Salty's and Suicide Bridge Restaurant contributed by Andrea Vernot and Brent Burkhardt

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About the Authors

Mary Lou Baker has been a food and travel writer since the 1980s, first as a restaurant reviewer and weekly travel columnist for the *Capital Gazette* newspaper in Annapolis and later as food and wine editor at *Baltimore Magazine*. She has traveled to London, Ireland, France, and Italy on food-centered excursions, served as the restaurant reviewer for *Chesapeake Life*, *Annapolis Lifestyle*, and *Shore Living* magazines and is the coauthor with Bonnie Rapoport of *Dining In Baltimore*. This native New Englander has lived in Annapolis for many years with her husband, raising four children and a series of Labrador retrievers and cooking with joy for family and friends who insist on being in the kitchen to watch while she bangs those pots and pans.

Holly Smith is managing editor of the nonprofit Washington Independent Review of Books in Washington, DC, and a longtime freelance writer. Her work has appeared in the *Washington Post*, *More Mirth of a Nation*, *USA Today Travel's 10Best*, *CNBC.com*, *Maryland Life*, *Brain, Child*, and many other publications. She blogs at HollySmithWrites.com and spends her free time hiding from her four kids. Wait, she doesn't have any free time . . .



Acknowledgments

As Holly and I came to the end of our seafood-centered treasure hunt on Maryland's Eastern and Western shores, we began another task: thanking folks who helped out along the way. First, of course, are the chefs and restaurant owners who came through with recipes to share. Granted, we had to be as persistent and pesky as summertime mosquitoes, but most of them stepped up—and we thank them a lot for their time and interest.

There are several generous “donors” deserving of thanks for their contributions to the book. One is Eastern Shore artist Nancy Hammond, known nationally as well as locally for her vibrant bay-themed creations. She authored a humorous “recipe” to accompany her *Chesapeake Bay Dinner* woodcut. And we are delighted to include John Payne's painting *Clear Skies*, courtesy of the McBride Gallery in Annapolis.

We thank the Maryland Office of Tourism for letting us use their detailed map of the Chesapeake Bay; Andrea Vernot and Brent Burkhardt, for their descriptions of Suicide Bridge and Old Salty's restaurants; author and chef John Shields of Gertrude's Restaurant at the Baltimore Museum of Art and noted food writer John Mariani for their encouragement along the way; Peter Leshner of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum for sharing his knowledge of the bay's history; and Steve Vilnitsky of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources for his guidance on the state's seafood sources. We also thank the many tourism officials from the counties surrounding the bay; their input helped immensely.

But most of all, I want to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Holly Smith, the organizational force and unofficial “left brain” behind this book. Holly was managing editor of *Maryland Life* magazine before it succumbed to the changing times and agreed to “help out” when I first signed up for this project. Neither of us was prepared for what lay ahead, but suffice it to say that Holly is now the official coauthor of *Seafood Lover's Chesapeake Bay* and, despite some rough waters, we remain fast friends.

Finally, we are both grateful to Globe Pequot editor Tracee Williams for her support and patience throughout the process and for her unfailing optimism that *Seafood Lover's Chesapeake Bay* would be a worthy addition to a series that also includes foodie tomes centered on New England and the Pacific Northwest. “You're only as good as your editor,” goes a saying in the publishing world. We hope we've done Tracee proud.

—Mary Lou Bakula



Introduction

Maryland's nickname may be the Free State, but it could just as aptly be dubbed the Seafood State. With nearly half its 23 counties hugging the Chesapeake Bay, Marylanders' access to fresh fish and other underwater delicacies must surely make their Mid-Atlantic neighbors jealous. And as any seafood lover worth his or her tartar sauce knows, the blue crab reigns supreme among these delicacies.

Often the star of crab cakes and soft-shell sandwiches—imagine two lightly battered claws poking out from between slices of white bread—blue crabs truly take center stage during that Maryland mainstay, the crab feast. Picture a dozen or so hungry friends sitting around a paper-covered table piled high with just-boiled crabs. Mallet in hand, each diner grabs one of the still-steaming crustaceans, gives it a solid whack, and starts picking out the sweet white flesh. Now picture several pitchers of beer and stacks of hand wipes scattered around. They're important parts of a crab feast, too.

Of course, sea-foodies can't live on crab alone. And in Maryland's Chesapeake Bay region, they don't have to. Another prized bay offering—the oyster—is fresh and plentiful here, at least during months with an “R” in them (that's when they're in season). Many Free State eateries get creative with the critters, going way beyond “served on the half shell” by tempting diners with everything from messy, delicious oyster po' boys to the more highfalutin oyster flatbread. But whether served dredge and deep-fried or glistening and raw, they'll satisfy even the pickiest bivalve buffs.

For anyone whose ideal seafood spread requires all things gilled and finned, the region delivers with its array of native fish, including catfish, American shad, Atlantic croaker, eel, and summer flounder. It's Maryland's official state fish, the rockfish, though, that usually gets top billing among diners. Also known as striped bass, rockfish is the star of many maritime munchies around the Chesapeake. Blackened and broiled or diced up appetizer-style, it deserves a place of honor on any undersea platter.

So there it is: Maryland's stellar seafood lineup in a clamshell, er, nutshell. Any state with an official fish *and* an official crustacean (the blue crab, naturally) must take its seafood seriously, and Maryland does. Read on to find out more about the bay's culinary offerings and the best Free State locales for sampling them. And remember: After a visit to the Chesapeake Bay region, you'll leave with a newfound love of the area, but there's not a chance you'll leave hungry.

The Chesapeake Bay: An Overview

Formed approximately 10,000 years ago when rising waters from the last ice age flooded the Susquehanna River Valley, the Chesapeake Bay—whose name comes from the Powhatan Indian word “chesepeiooc,” which means “great shellfish bays”—runs from the top of eastern Maryland to the bottom and plays a major role in the state's geography, economy, and way of life. Here are several key facts about this vital body of water:



- The bay is one of the largest estuaries (a body of water where fresh water and salt water mix) in the US.
- It is 200 miles long, stretching from Havre de Grace, Maryland, to the Atlantic Ocean.
- At its widest point, the bay spans 30 miles; at its narrowest, it spans just under 4 miles.
- The average depth of the bay (including all its tributaries) is 21 feet, although several troughs run nearly 9 times that deep.
- It holds more than 18 trillion gallons of water, half of which come from the Atlantic Ocean.
- The bulk of the bay's fresh water is supplied by the Potomac, Susquehanna, and James Rivers.
- Each day, roughly 51 billion gallons of water flow into the bay from its tributaries.
- Counting its tributaries, the bay has 11,684 miles of shoreline and 4,480 square miles of surface area.
- The bay is part of the Intracoastal Waterway, connecting the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal (which links the bay to the Delaware River) with the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal (which links the bay to Virginia's Elizabeth River and North Carolina's Albemarle Sound beyond).
- The bay remains an active, important shipping channel for large container vessels entering or leaving the Port of Baltimore.
- The bay is home to 2,700-plus species of plants and animals, 521 of which are finfish or shellfish.
- Approximately 500 million pounds of seafood are harvested from the bay's waters every year.
- One-third of the Atlantic coast's entire migratory bird population winters on the bay.
- Molting blue crabs seek shelter from predators in bay grass, more than 80,000 acres of which grow in shallow areas of the bay and its tributaries.

Although several seafaring explorers reached the area before him, it's famed British captain John Smith who first mapped the Chesapeake Bay region, a 2-year project begun in 1607. Less than 30 years later, in 1634, Lord Baltimore established the first English colony in Maryland, known then (and now) as St. Mary's City.

Over the next two centuries, the bay area witnessed its share of growth—and conflict. Site of the

Revolutionary War's Battle of the Chesapeake (wherein a French fleet crushed the Royal Navy near the mouth of the bay in Virginia), the estuary played an even more decisive role in the War of 1812. Not only did the "rockets' red glare" from a skirmish at Ft. McHenry in Baltimore Harbor inspire Francis Scott Key to pen "The Star-Spangled Banner," but British troops used the waterway as a quick route to Washington, DC, which they promptly overran and burned.

"From the earliest days of American colonialism, the Chesapeake first kept alive, then nourished, generations of settlers for whom the bounty of the bay was limitless, enduring, and among the finest seafood regions of the world. If today the Chesapeake itself needs nourishing, it is still a gleaming symbol of the excellence of American marine life and a rich source of lore for so many food cultures, from Native Americans to the immigrants who came after them."

—John Mariani, author of *The Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink*

The Chesapeake Bay's more recent history has involved far fewer battles, but just as many fights. The so-called Oyster Wars, which took place from 1865 until 1959, consisted of licensed, legal fishermen perpetually duking it out with "oyster pirates" over who had rightful claim to harvest the bay's bounty. (An ill-conceived Maryland Oyster Navy was formed in 1868 to patrol the waters; no match for the heavily armed pirates, it was ultimately disbanded.)



Clear Skies—oil painting (18 x 26)
by John Payne of fishermen at Assateague Island National Seashore,
courtesy of McBride Gallery, Annapolis
MD; giclee print available.

While the Oyster Wars eventually petered out, the plight of the oysters themselves (as well as that of blue crabs, rockfish, other fish, and plants) took a dramatic turn for the worse. By the 1970s, pollution, algae blooms, disease, and overfishing led to serious oxygen depletion and, soon after, to the Chesapeake's dubious distinction as one of the world's first "marine dead zones." As the bay withered, so did the number of men and women whose livelihoods depended on the water.

Today, thanks to intensive conservation efforts, harvesting regulations, and repopulation programs, the bay is beginning once again to flourish. Although it's unlikely the Chesapeake will ever return to its original glory days—when there were enough oysters to filter the entire bay in just 3.3 days, a feat that now takes roughly a year—groups like the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and the Oyster Recovery Partnership are making strides toward reinvigorating the region's most essential body of

water and the treasure trove of seafood swimming within it.

Maryland's Seafood Traditions

Backyard barbecues. Crab feasts. Boat lunches. Bull roasts. Hunt breakfasts. Oyster suppers. Raw bar. Crab cakes. Soft-shell crab sandwiches. Broiled rockfish. Planked bluefish. Fried clams. Steamed mussels. Maryland crab soup. Cream of crab soup. Sweet potato pie. Corn chowder. Clam chowder. Eggplant fritters. Stuffed Smithfield ham. Strawberry pie. Apple cobbler. Fried green Eastern Shore tomatoes. Silver Queen corn. Crab imperial. Venison stew. Sauerkraut. Fried chicken. Clam pie. Terrapin soup. Beaten biscuits. Roast duck. Venison kebabs. Shad roe. Spring lamb. Smith Island cake.

Maryland sets a bountiful table, groaning under the weight of regional specialties inspired by the abundance of the Chesapeake Bay and its fertile farmlands and fruit orchards. While traditional Maryland cooking can trace its origins to its Native American settlers and Colonial times, those who have come more recently to this hospitable land of pleasant living have made their own ethnic contributions, creating a cuisine as varied and abundant as anywhere in the world.

If, as a recent travel survey shows, people rank the food of a region high on their list when selecting a vacation destination, Maryland is a gustatory shoo-in. From a growing number of upscale restaurants to colorful crab houses, the Chesapeake Bay region offers an endless variety of delectable choices and hospitable settings.

As “armchair tourists,” set out with us for a trip in search of regional specialties and some of the cooks who are working hard to make diners happy. Space and stamina limit the number of “stops” we can make on our odyssey, and we apologize upfront for overlooking many worthy destinations.

One need look no further than the home cook for a taste of typical Maryland cooking. The addition of sauerkraut to the traditional turkey dinner is widespread, a quirky twist that raises the eyebrows of out-of-state guests visiting for the holidays. Steamed crabs are a Maryland staple that also befuddles visitors, mostly because the art of picking a crab has a certain barbaric quality that is alien to the inlander. Isn't it true that there is a level of unholy glee associated with introducing them to the ritual of the Crab Feast—complete with newspapers on the table, wooden mallets and knives in place of cutlery, and paper towels instead of napkins?

Cantler's, a family-owned crab and seafood restaurant on a creek outside of Annapolis, has entertained more than its share of first-time crab-pickers. Several years back, Dan Cantler was invited to stage a Maryland crab feast at the prestigious James Beard House in Manhattan. When he arrived with his brown paper “tablecloths,” mallets, and knives, he was shown into a dining room set with fine china, silver, and crystal. Cantler diplomatically asked that the room be reset in proper “crab-feast style” and quickly saved the day by transforming the setting from Big City to Maryland Style.

INSIDER TIPS

Crab Feasts 101

About to attend your first crab feast? You're in for a treat! (Assuming you can get over the shock of seeing grown people zealously pound piles of crustaceans with little wooden hammers.)

Before heading to the big event, keep in mind that crab feasts are:

- **Messy.** This is no time to go all genteel and pompous. You're going to get your hands—and, quite possibly, your clothes and your hair—dirty. So relax. It's part of the fun.
- **Communal.** There's no ordering off the a la carte menu at a crab feast. Expect to be served big platters of steamed crabs and corn on the cob, along with such sides as coleslaw and boiled potatoes. Condiment-wise, look for Old Bay Seasoning, lemon wedges, and maybe some tartar or cocktail sauce.
- **Primal.** You may be self-conscious about breaking crab claws in half to dig out the meat, or about bashing the shell with a mallet, but don't be. There's no elegant way to eat a whole crab, so don't bother trying. Miss Manners will understand.
- **Simple.** Don't expect linen napkins or a wine list. Crab feasts demand newspaper-covered tables, hand wipes, cold beer, soda, and little else.
- **A lot of fun.** Even if you aren't a seafood lover, it's hard not to get caught up in the playful atmosphere at a crab feast. How can you take things too seriously when bits of shell are flying and the brews are flowing?

HOW TO ENJOY YOUR DELICIOUS MARYLAND STEAMED CRABS

It's really very simple - just follow the instructions. You'll be rewarded by an epicurean treat that is one of the great traditions in Maryland eating - the "hard" or steamed blue crab of the Chesapeake Bay.



STEP 1

With thumb or knife point, pry off apron flap on underside and discard.

The Life of the Blue Crab

Blue Crabs are found in abundance along the Eastern Seaboard but prefer waters which range from ocean saltness to fresh, thus the Chesapeake Bay provides ideal conditions. Life begins in the spring Bay where female or "sponge" crabs deposit their eggs between the first of June and the end of August. The baby crabs, which at birth, are about 1/25 of an inch long appear very unlike the mature crab and look more like a swimming quatern shell with seven pairs of legs and a long tail. This "Zoea" sheds its shell several times when it begins to resemble the adult, and is then called a "megalopa", typically, crabs hatch from the egg in late June, pass thru the larval stage by August, and start to migrate up the bay during early fall, or until the cold weather hails their migration. In the spring their journey is reversed and full maturity is reached when the crab is 12 to 14 months old. In order to increase its size, the crab must molt or shed its outer skeleton. As it approaches a molt it becomes first a "juvener" and as it molts sheds its old shell it becomes a "soft" crab. The main velvet in texture and roughly 10% again as large as the discarded shell. During the struggle for existence, crabs frequently lose legs and claws. Within a week of such loss, a new appendage begins to form, but it takes at least two moltings to fully replace the lost. For some reason the crab population is very variable and a plentiful season may be followed by a lean one.



STEP 3

With knife edge scrape off and discard Areas A & B. This exposes flesh.

With thumb and index finger, peel out meat.



STEP 2

With thumb or knife point, lift off top shell and discard it.

Break off hinged claws and set aside for eating later.

STEP 5

Meat under membrane cover in each half of crab can be exposed by removing this cover with knife OR you may slice lengthwise through the center of each half without removing the membrane. Each method will expose large succulent chunks of meat which may be removed with fingers or knife. Crack large claws with mallet or knife handle to expose meat within.



STEP 4

Hold crab at each side and break apart at center. Discard apron flap.

THE CRAB CLAW
NAVY POINT • ST. MICHAELS, MD.

ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF THE CRAB CLAW IN ST. MICHAELS, MARYLAND

Another anecdote involves the late (and lamented) iconic Obrycki's restaurant in Baltimore, operated for years by the Cernak family. Among their many guests were the owners of several upscale New York City restaurants, who so enjoyed their "crab initiation" at Obrycki's that they invited the Cernaks to stage a series of crab feasts at Rockefeller Plaza. They were wildly successful and inspired an enterprising New Yorker to open a Maryland-style crab house in his city.

An example of yet another "Maryland export," this one overseas, is the fried chicken with gravy listed on the menu of a popular bistro in Paris. The late William Taylor, a Southern Maryland caterer who earned a national reputation as the guru of Chesapeake cuisine, happened upon the bistro and asked the chef for the recipe.

"Deep-fry the chicken, then make the gravy by adding flour and milk to the grease," he was told.

Ever the Southern gentleman, Taylor restrained himself and thanked the chef. “I found that, in Europe if the bird is fried, they call it Maryland chicken,” said Taylor, who made a name for himself as “the dinner designer” for guests at the historic Sotterley Plantation in Southern Maryland.

Southern Maryland, site of the state’s first capital in St. Mary’s City, is also the cradle of typical Maryland cuisine. Its regional specialties have changed little since Colonial days, with kale and cabbage creating a green layer in slices of pale pink stuffed Smithfield hams that appear on springtime tables. We recently attended a “how-to-stuff-a-ham” workshop at the Historic St. Mary’s City Museum, watching as the senior-citizen demonstrators carried on the traditions of their ancestors by using a fish-boning knife to make crescent-shaped gashes in the ham, filling them with piles of leafy greens, and tying up the meat with fishing twine. The technique, we were told, was originally used by slaves and passed along through the years by their descendants.

Moving north, a stop in Annapolis should include a step back in time at the historic Maryland Inn where the kitchen remains a bastion of Maryland cuisine. Here you will find specialties such as Maryland-raised lamb, rockfish simply broiled or crowned with crab imperial, and perhaps a Colonial style trifle layered with fresh local berries. If icy oysters and clams on the half shell are your preference, try the raw bars at Blackwall Hitch in Eastport and McGarvey’s across from the City Market in Annapolis, or down an oyster shooter at the Middleton Tavern next door to McGarvey’s.

For a view of the Annapolis Harbor while feasting on crabs, climb the steps to Phillips Crab Deck where you can watch the staff counting out the crustaceans and shucking the oysters. Or take the free ferry from the City Dock for a quick trip to Carrol’s Creek Cafe in Eastport, where seafood of all kinds is a specialty and the waterside setting is another plus.

Cantler’s, a rustic crab house and seafood restaurant, is another worthy stop, but be sure to get directions before wending your way over a backcountry road to get there. You will notice a parking lot full of cars with out-of-state plates at this popular destination, but once inside, there’s breezy service by a young waitstaff and crabs fresh out of the water. Wander down to the creek and see crustaceans moving in the holding tubs as they await their fate.

Maryland’s Eastern Shore seems to have become a magnet for graduates of well-known cooking schools. Three of them are Eastern Shore natives, who, after graduation, worked at some of the best restaurants on both coasts before “going home” to open their own places. Jordan Lloyd, chef-owner of the Bartlett Pear Inn in Easton, and Ian Campbell, chef-owner of Bistro Poplar in Cambridge, are graduates of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park. Doug Potts, a Cordon Bleu graduate, is the chef at the Peacock Restaurant at the Inn at 202 Dover in Easton. Jim Hughes, chef-owner of Restaurant 213 in the tiny town of Fruitland, has international credentials in the culinary stratosphere. Each of these chefs likes to add a Maryland-style twist to their menus in terms of style and ingredients.

In Baltimore the long-reigning queen of Maryland cookery is Nancy Longo, the chef-owner of Pierpoint in the city’s Fell’s Point neighborhood. Known for her emphasis on regional cooking since opening in the 1980s, Longo at one time would smoke the just-caught game of a hunter, custom-create a spring symphony of fresh asparagus and shad roe, and improvise a “Maryland-style cioppino” by adding rockfish, clams, scallops, and oysters to her original “soup crabs” stock. Fed by her Baltimore roots and her extensive research into the origins of Maryland cooking, Longo brings her passion into the present, calling her style both “new-wavey and nontraditional.”

Maryland cuisine has come a long way from its 17th-century origins. Today’s chefs might stuff their ravioli with oysters, fry cattail shoots from an Eastern Shore marsh to use as garnish, sauté soft crabs in a crust of chopped walnuts and cornflakes, make a crab timbale with spaghetti squash, or use flecks of Smithfield ham to enliven a beurre blanc sauce.

Our research has taken us to the Eastern and Western shores of the Chesapeake region, and we are

grateful to the restaurants who so generously shared their recipes with us—and with our readers. Many are simple enough for the home cook, though several are pretty advanced. And, by the way, we never did find that “perfect crab cake” in our travels. Maybe it exists only in the minds of its maker. Guess it’s up to our readers to take up the hunt.

How to Use This Guide

Although Maryland is small, it has unrivaled access to fresh seafood; more than half its counties ring the Chesapeake Bay, giving the Free State unlimited undersea offerings. Since each area lining the Chesapeake Bay is distinct—with its own unique foodie draws—we’ve divided this book into regions: the Upper Bay, the Eastern Shore, the Western Shore, and Southern Maryland. Broken out by county are some of the best seafood restaurants. These are the places that serve authentic Chesapeake Bay seafood in settings ranging from upscale to down-home. Some are newish, others are elder statesmen but they’re all terrific.

Within these regions, you’ll also find information on:

Maritime Must-Sees. A list of the captivating lighthouses, public piers, museums, and other nautical draws that make the region special.

Cherishing the Chesapeake. A peek at the programs and initiatives aimed at returning the bay to its former glory.

Colorful Characters. A look at some of the interesting people who live near, work on, promote, or simply love the Chesapeake Bay.

Insider Tips. Whether it’s how to hold a crab mallet or where to find the region’s sweetest oysters, these tips will have you looking (and eating) like a local in no time.



THE UPPER BAY

Capping the Chesapeake's headwaters, Cecil and Harford Counties make up Maryland's Upper Bay region. Cecil lies in the state's northeast corner, right along the Pennsylvania and Delaware borders. With several beautiful rivers—including the Susquehanna, Elk, and North East—flowing through it and into the bay, the county was once an important shipping port. Today, it lures visitors with historic towns like Port Deposit and South Chesapeake City, as well as with draws like the Turkey Point Lighthouse and the Conowingo Dam. It's also a must-visit stop on any seafood lover's tour of the state.

The same can be said of Harford County, whose quaint towns—including historic Havre de Grace, which unfolds along the banks of the Susquehanna and boasts some of the area's finest waterfront views—offer endless opportunities to explore, shop, and (most importantly) eat. After touring the county's Decoy Museum, the Concord Point Lighthouse, the Havre de Grace Maritime Museum, and the Skipjack *Martha Lewis*, hungry visitors' challenge won't be deciding what to eat (seafood, of course!), but where to eat it.

Casual noshers hoping to dine alfresco won't be disappointed by the Upper Bay's crab houses. As long as the seasons (summer and fall) and seasoning (Old Bay) are at hand, eateries along the rivers and bay offer the perfect place to grab a mallet—and a beer—and get cracking (literally!). Higher-end culinarians can opt for a more upscale establishment, where the tablecloths are white and the catch of the day is likely to include a wine pairing. (Just don't be afraid to eat with your hands; certain seafood dishes, no matter how high-brow, somehow taste better when you forgo the fork.)

Cecil County

Backfin Blues Bar and Grill, 19 S. Main St., Port Deposit, MD 21904; (410) 378-2722; backfinblues.com. Bob Steele, chef-owner of this seafood-themed eatery in the tiny town of Port Deposit (population 653), loves his job. “Otherwise, I wouldn't do it,” says the veteran restaurateur and passionate cook, who features three different seafood dishes every weekend. And while his crab dishes are made with Maryland blue crab, he uses a reliable supplier as a source for South African lobster tails, Chilean sea bass, Coho salmon, New England scallops, barramundi, wahoo, swordfish, and Washington State sole. Steele is known for his creativity in the kitchen, saucing a savory appetizer of Crab Louis with his own brown-butter-brandied blend, using a red pepper base to color and flavor a deliciously different lobster bisque, and dressing up calamari fried in cornmeal with his own garlic-infused tomato sauce. Finfish specials are sauced in a variety of ways, depending on the chef's whim. Backfin Blues, with a reputation as a “gourmet casual” restaurant, does not offer hard crabs on its menu. Rather, it is known for crab cakes made with “colossal lump crab,” cream of crab soup, and Chef Bob's special crab imperial. In addition to seafood, Backfin Blues is known as the place to go for first-rate beef entrees and for its well-priced and well-chosen wine list. Ask about its Wine Club. Townhomes block what was once a full view of the Susquehanna River, now only partially visible from the two seasonal outdoor spaces (a deck and a side porch seating 60) and the 75-seat dining room. Count on friendly service and super seafood at Chef Bob's place. Note: Backfin Blues serves dinner from 5 p.m. Wed through Sat and Sun brunch 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Bayard House, 11 Bohemia Ave., Chesapeake City, MD 21915; (410) 885-5040; bayardhouse.com
We were delighted to discover Wernfried Wiesnegger, chef-owner of the beautiful Bayard House in

the pretty 19th-century shipping village of Chesapeake City. Idyllically situated on the shores of the scenic Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, his property includes an upscale restaurant, as well as the quirky Hole-in-the-Wall Bar and an adorable cottage straight out of a storybook. Wiesnegger has his own story—although his innate modesty veils his considerable talents and culinary background. A native of Austria, he studied at the same culinary school of which Wolfgang Puck is an alumnus and orchestrates a kitchen that rivals the best in the state. A perusal of the Bayard House menu reflects Wiesnegger’s classical training, evident in the use of sauces in such special treats as his signature “Tournedos Baltimore”—a pairing of twin beef filets with a lobster cake finished with a seafood Champagne sauce and a crab cake napped with a lovely Madeira cream sauce. Peruse the lunch or dinner menus as you enjoy the bucolic scenery from the outdoor patio, in one of the two enclosed porches or in a comfortable inside dining room. Seafood has a starring role on the Bayard House bill of fare—blending the best of Eastern Shore specialties with the chef’s European flair. An appetizer of clams steamed in a garlicky white wine broth comes with a toasted French baguette to mop up the savory sauce; mussels Provençal live up to expectations, steamed in a drinkable broth flecked with tomatoes, shallots, and fresh herbs; a crab and artichoke dip is worth the calories. Top-notch crab cakes are enhanced with a lemon beurre blanc; the chef’s seafood stew (aka cioppino) features scallops, clams, shrimp, mussels, and chunks of fish in a vibrant tomato broth; a unique entree featuring Anaheim peppers filled with lobster, crab, and shrimp, doused with a green chili sauce and cheddar cheese, then baked and topped with sour cream is a popular item at both lunch and dinner. Chef Weisnegger takes good care of carnivores with grilled lamb chops enhanced with a Madeira demi-glace and parmesan risotto and a 12-ounce rib eye crowned with caramelized onions. Bayard House is a thoroughly delightful destination—and guests can even overnight in the adjoining cottage and wander down the street in the morning for breakfast at the Bohemia Cafe and Bakery, another of Chef Weisnegger’s “gifts” to Chesapeake City.

Captain Chris’ Crab Shack, 1701 Turkey Point Rd., North East, MD 21901; (410) 287-7070; captainscrabs.com. If you’re looking for a combined crab feast and beach party, think about this super-casual crab shack in Cecil County, about 0.5 mile from the North East River. Owned and operated by Captain Chris Shelton since 2008, it has become a popular spot for visitors to the nearby Elk Neck State Park and the outdoor-themed North Bay recreation center, as well as locals and tourists longing for that sweet taste of Maryland blue crabs. Come prepared to get sandy as you join the crowds at picnic tables that seat about 200 on a replica of an ocean beach. While the biggest attraction is the seasonal All-You-Can-Eat Crabs and Sweet Corn Feast for \$24.95, another is the selection of steamed-to-order seafood, including jumbo peel-and-eat shrimp flecked with onions and green peppers; wild-caught littleneck clams properly escorted with natural broth freshened with garlic and melted “real” butter; a pound of Prince Edward Island mussels with the same accompaniments; and Louisiana “crawdads” billed as “Maryland meets Louisiana” in tribute to Captain Chris’ secret seasoning recipe. Leashed and well-mannered Fidos are welcome, although management jokingly warns that rowdy kids could be used as crab bait. Despite that dire threat, kids’ meals include fries or chips and a beverage for \$4.95. Note: Captain Chris’ Crab Shack is open every day but Tues from late Apr until late Oct.

CHERISH THE CHESAPEAKE

Area Restaurants Embrace the “True Blue Crabs” Campaign

Steve Vilnit is picky about the crabmeat he eats. “Locally harvested or none at all” is the mantra

of this cheerleader for Maryland’s signature seafood—the blue crab. Responding to the surge of crabmeat imported from elsewhere, Vilnit, director of seafood marketing at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), launched the “Maryland True Blue Crabs” campaign in 2012. He originally enlisted five local restaurants to pledge their allegiance to “the real thing”—a number that has grown to nearly 200 supporters statewide, including restaurants, caterers, retailers, schools, and even some hospital food service providers.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAY FLEMING



Vilnit and his colleagues at DNR also cast their nets to lure some 500 chefs to experience firsthand what it takes to bring Chesapeake Bay seafood to their tables. Chefs from Maryland, Virginia, Philadelphia, Delaware, and Washington, DC, have been treated to boat trips on the bay and its tributaries, meeting Maryland watermen and witnessing firsthand their labor-intensive work.

While 2012 marked a banner year for blue crabs, unseasonably cold weather in 2013 and 2014 meant that the crustaceans extended their hibernation period, slept late in their bay-bottom beds, and shortened their reproductive cycle. This catch-22 of limited supply and undiminished demand translates into higher prices for consumers. While males have long been favored as superior in size to the females, 2014 saw a reversal in roles as females outweighed their counterparts. A debate about a possible temporary moratorium on crab harvesting is troubling to both watermen and restaurant owners.

For those who demand the sweet taste of Maryland blue crabs, look for the Maryland True

Blue Crabs logo on restaurant windows—and tell them Steve Vilnit sent you.



The Granary, 100 George St., Georgetown, MD 21930; (410) 275-1603; granary.biz. Splendidly situated on the Sassafras River, The Granary site has been a local landmark in one iteration or other since the 1800s—first as a storage location for corn and grain, then a yacht club, and then a restaurant opened in the 1940s. Fire destroyed the original building in 1985, leaving behind only the hand-hewn beams in the “new” Granary that reopened in 2013 and is going strong under the direction of Owner David Anderson, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America with years of experience as an executive chef at several Delaware restaurants. His establishment is multifaceted, offering breakfast, lunch, dinner, and carryout or dockside pickup in its casual Sassafras Grill as well as lunch and dinner in the more “dressed up” inside tables of The Granary. Chef Jess Burrell is a talented chef who devotes a good part of the restaurant’s menu to seafood, buying local when he can and providing fresh in-season produce from area farms. His style, honed by 12 years at Harry’s Savoy Grill in Delaware, shows some innovative twists that add interest to The Granary’s menu. This is evident in his original scallop dish, featuring dry-boat biggies served with a mélange of pickled jalapeño, red onion, arugula, and feta cheese sparked with a lemon-orange dressing and sprinkled with a balsamic vinegar reduction. We liked such little amenities as his version of the oyster po’ boy, lightly battered seafood bedded on good French bread; meaty Maryland crab cakes sided in-season with fresh corn and lima bean succotash; a casserole of macaroni and cheese with crab, andouille sausage, corn, and roasted red peppers with a surprise touch of tomato fondue; and the option of partnering tomato-based Maryland crab with the creamy version on top. This may be the only restaurant serving Sassafras River Fries—dressed up with crabmeat and cheese sauce seasoned with Old Bay. You have to taste it to believe it. Everyone is glad to have The Granary back in business. Friendly service, a prime location, and a variety of options from dockside carryout to romantic dining seem to ensure its success.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GRANARY



Mick's Crab House, 902 E. Pulaski Hwy., Elkton, MD 21921; (443) 485-6007; mickscrabhouse.net. If you get a craving for crabs as soon as you cross the Maryland line on Route 95, you are only 5 minutes away from Mick's Crab House in Elkton. Crab-hungry customers come from New Jersey, Philly, and Delaware, according to Owner Michael ("Mick") McNeal, who bought the popular seafood spot in 2010. Crab is king at his place, which cannot claim a water view despite a sand-covered outside patio, which is pleasant in cool weather but not so in the summer. The big draw is that Mick's Crab House is open year-round and has a year-round all-you-can-eat (AYCE) crab policy that in-season features Maryland blue crabs. Otherwise, McNeal looks to Louisiana, Georgia, and the Carolinas for supplies. A unique feature of his restaurant is a daily online posting on the restaurant's website giving sizes and market prices for the much-in-demand crustaceans. Crabs may account for a big chunk of the business at this 200-seat restaurant, but there are lots of other seafood options on the menu. Steamed shrimp, mussels, and clams are popular, as are oysters, scallops, and salmon prepared down-home style by a team of cooks in the kitchen. "We don't have chefs here—but we do have good cooks," says McNeal. He buys his produce locally and loves the season when Maryland corn and tomatoes are available.

Nauti Goose, 100 Cherry St., North East, MD 21901; (410) 287-7880; nautigoose.net. Gotta love the name—a provocative ID that Nauti Goose has used to good advantage since opening in 2001. Situated at the mouth of the scenic North East River on the Upper Chesapeake Bay, this attractive multilevel restaurant has the seasonal advantages of waterfront docking and waterfront dining on its deck or terrace, as well as a sheltered, more formal dining room. Just coming in for a drink and maybe light fare? You have your choice of five bar areas where there's a lot of happy talk going on and probably some lively music. Nauti Goose has a full menu of choices, and appetizers are a good way to start. Chunks of breaded and fried rockfish come with a tangy barbecue sauce, an excellent crab dip comes with toasted flatbread for dipping, and seared ahi tuna is brightened with segments of mandarin oranges and mayonnaise hottened with sriracha sauce. Nauti Goose can be proud of its lump crab cake sandwich, the cake crusted from a quick sear and bedded on a brioche-style roll with a smear of garlic aioli. Another winning sandwich is grilled rockfish that picks up the spicy flavor of its dry rub and is sweetened with homemade mango salsa. Seafood entrees include a buttery seafood scampi featuring shrimp, scallops, and mussels piled on pasta brightened with spinach and baby tomatoes; and a cream old-fashioned baked crab imperial. We're guessing that some folks just come for drinks and for the Nauti Goose's famous desserts: a rich fudge cake soaked in either coffee liqueur or raspberry brandy and filled with chocolate mousse or cheesecake with raspberry puree. They may be Nauti—but they're so very good.

The River Shack at the Wellwood, 523 Water St., Charlestown, MD 21914; (410) 287-6666; wellwoodclub.com/RiverShack; [@TheWellwood](https://www.instagram.com/TheWellwood). The Wellwood is an historic site on the North East River in Cecil County. Dating back to the late 1800s as a private club for "optimists and humanitarians . . . to promote the 'happy habit' . . . and discourage strife and promote good fellowship," it thrives today as a beautiful destination for upscale dining in the main building or for casual crab feasts in a separate venue called River Shack on the edge of a sandy beach. Over the years visitors to the Wellwood included presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Calvin Coolidge, remembered with a hand-carved bar said to be donated by President Roosevelt after his visit. Today, these and other antiques add elegance to the Wellwood's warren of dining rooms, where seafood starters include shrimp steamed with a dose of Old Bay, mussels in a spicy marina sauce served with good French bread for "mopping" purposes, blackened ahi tuna sided with a hot wasabi sauce and a cool-down cucumber salad, and fried "lobster bites" accompanied by the kitchen's original honey-jalapeño sauce.

Seafood entrees feature a fun “Select Your Fish” option (flounder, salmon, tuna, rockfish, and fish of the day) broiled or blackened, with a choice of toppings (lobster cream, bruschetta, crab imperial) and sauces (wild berry, Dijon mustard-caper, lemon-herb). Cold-water lobster tails, crab cakes, Dungeness and snow crab legs, scallops, and oysters round out the menu. In season, the Wellwood’s River Shack is a favorite place for boaters who dock at the establishment’s slips to enjoy a crab feast at picnic tables set up on a sandy strip outdoors—or order carryout food or beverages. Steamed hard crabs are specialty (subject to availability), but there are other seafood options, such as oysters on the half shell, steamed shrimp and clams, mussels in a red sauce, and a fish sandwich. The River Shack’s sherried crab bisque and tomato-based Maryland crab, each made from family recipes, are outstanding. Owned since 1958 by the Metz family, the Wellwood and its River Shack are well-run operations that make patrons happy to be there.

Schaefer’s Canal House, 208 Bank St., Chesapeake City, MD 21915; (410) 885-7200; schaefercanalhouse.com; @SchaeferMarina. Watercraft large and small parade in front of Schaefer’s Canal House beside the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal, a busy thoroughfare for trade and travel. The sprawling restaurant, with an outdoor Lighthouse Bar and dining decks on two levels, is a tried-and-true favorite of boaters who like the convenience of pulling into the adjacent deep water marina for food, fuel, and friendly service. Landlubbers like it, too. Schaefer’s goes back a ways, the property held by the Schaefer family from 1907 until 1973. The restaurant started with a beer garden in 1935 and has evolved through several owners to become the showplace it is today. But it still retains an old-fashioned charm despite a total makeover that is nothing short of stunning. And seafood remains the big draw, whether it’s the restaurant’s delicious crab dip (lump crabmeat topped with bacon and chopped scallions), a bountiful fried seafood platter of panko-battered jumbo shrimp and oysters, the kitchen’s top-notch crab cake; or a heavenly combination of meaty scallops bedded on sautéed wild mushrooms and a fluffy risotto dressed up with white truffle oil. Other options are the kitchen’s knock-out “C&D Jambalaya”—big shrimp and scallops, clams, mussels, lobster, and andouille sausage in a creole sauce mixed with saffron-tinged rice. Lobster tails are broiled and served with drawn butter, fresh mahimahi gets crusted with Parmesan cheese, and grilled salmon comes with basil-lemon butter. Take just about any seat at one of Schaefer’s tables and you can watch a real live “boat show” while enjoying good food and attentive service. And on weekends, there is music to go along with it all—everything from reggae to blues to jazz.

The Tap Room, 201 Bohemia Ave., Chesapeake City, MD 21915; (410) 885-2344; taproomcrabhouse.com. If a restaurant celebrates its 34th year in business, as The Tap Room Restaurant did in 2014, the owner must be doing something right. That’s the way it is with Chef-Owner Joe Montesusco, whose Italian mother’s kitchen was his cooking school. His most spectacular seafood special is The Tap Room’s garlic crabs, an original preparation that involves removing the shell and innards of the crabs and simmering them in a butter-and-garlic sauce with Montesusco’s special spices. A friend who lives in Chesapeake City told me about them, and I thank her. The restaurant, about a block away from the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, is convenient for boaters, who can “park” at the nearby marina. Decor is nautical rustic, with sailboats on the curtains and brown paper-covered tables at the ready for the messy business of picking crabs. Aided in the kitchen by longtime assistant Sandy, Montesusco is also at the ready to doctor up his homemade linguini with a pair of jumbo lump crab cakes or (in season) whale soft shells, mussels, shrimp, clams, or “all of the above” in The Tap Room’s legendary Seafood Pescatore. Diners have a choice of the chef’s homemade sauces—marinara, tomato, or a light wine-butter blend. Home-cooked food, friendly service, and those garlic crabs make a visit to The Tap Room special. But remember—this place is so

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