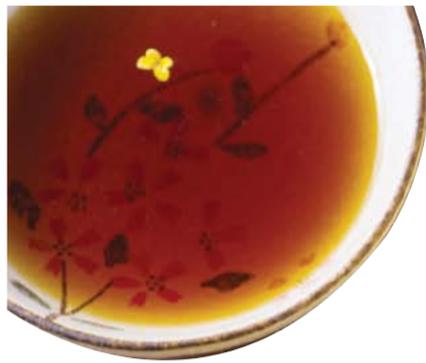




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Steaming is the best way to preserve the flavor of crabs' sweet meat.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



Crab season is upon us

In late autumn, dine on the freshwater kings of crustaceans and savor the luscious roe and milt

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They are perhaps the most famous of all crustaceans, steamed, boiled or braised. Cooked in a spice mix, or doused in a tangy sauce, crabs are the ultimate food for company almost everywhere in the world.

In China, late autumn is crab season, and time for hairy crabs or mitten crabs. They are the freshwater kings of crustaceans, valued for their delicious roe and milt, rich and luscious all through autumn. The females with their orange roe come into season first, usually in October or in the ninth lunar month.

Their round bellies will be full and tight, with glimpses of orange showing through their translucent white under shells. Often, the roe will overflow, tinting their broad, bell-shaped belly flaps and even the tips of their spindly legs.

The larger males have a belly flap as well, although it is sharper and more like a long arrowhead. They, too, will be full of milt, a much softer, creamier version of the female roe. This, too, is tinted but it is a much softer yellow.

The highlight of eating mitten crabs is that first mouthful of roe and milt. The rich roe is harder and tastes like hard-cooked egg yolk. But personally, I prefer the softer milt, which coats the mouth with a silky deliciousness.

After that, you have to work pretty hard to extract the meat from the relatively small crabs. Mitten crabs average about 150 to 180

grams for females, while males weigh in at 180 to 200 grams.

Because of the unusual weather this year, though, the hairy crabs have grown unusually large, coming up to almost 250 to 300 grams.

At that size, they would be best eaten steamed with ginger and dried perilla leaves, turned on their backs so no juices are lost in the cooking.

If the glut continues, you may want to pickle them in a sauce and wine liqueur, turning them into mouth-tingling drunken crabs that can be eaten raw or cooked.

The first step will be to clean them very well, using a wire brush to remove the "hair" on their claws. That matted mess helps them trap food, but it also traps other undesirable organisms, so cleaning that well is very important.

A generous dousing with Chinese *baijiu* or white spirits will help anesthetize them while you prepare the marinade.

You need a pickling jar, some ginger, green onions, star anise and Sichuan peppercorns, a full bottle of Chinese rice wine or yellow wine, half a bottle of good soy sauce and another cup of *baijiu*.

Smash the herbs and place them in the pickling jar, add the spices and then add the liquids. Stir to mix.

Drop the drunken crabs into the marinade, making sure they are fully submerged in the liquid. Cover the pickling jar and store in a cool, dark place for about 20 days.

After that time, the crabs will develop dark orange sweet roe and milt that is even more flavorful, and flesh that is gelatinous and amazingly sweet. If your digestive system is not used

to raw seafood, you can also steam the crabs and eat them cooked.

Pickled drunken crabs can also be used as a seasoning for tender fresh chicken. Chop up the crabs and cook together with chicken as a light stew. Just add lots of ginger and shallots.

Along China's coastal regions, saltwater crabs are also fattening up to prepare for the mating season and the approaching winter.

There are plenty of regions that produce mud crabs along the coasts, from East China's Shandong Peninsula right down the eastern seaboard, and from the Fujian-Guangdong coast right down to South China's Hainan Island.

The fattest and most famous mud crabs are found in Sanmen Bay, where Central China's Henan province meets the South China Sea. Here, the mudflats produce green crabs.

The crabs have grown so popular that they are now mostly farmed and then sent by special courier all over China. They are still alive at the end of the journey, or there is a money-back guarantee.

In this season, Sanmen green crabs are packed full of sweet meat. The males would have grown mighty pincers, ready to do battle for their desired mates. The females would be full of roe.

So, depending on how you like your crab, you are spoiled for choice during these couple of months.

Join the annual ritual with a pair of freshwater hairy crabs and suck up their succulent roe and milt, and then delicately dissect their meat.

Or, indulge in a couple of huge Sanmen green crabs and enjoy their sweet meat.

Recipes

Hairy crabs

Scrub the crabs very clean without releasing their bonds. The idea is to keep them tied up so they don't drop their legs during the cooking.

Some chefs like to cook them alive, but I think it's more merciful to kill them with a well-aimed stab to the heart just before cooking.

Once washed, place the crabs in a steaming rack, shell side down. Scatter lots of shredded ginger and dried perilla leaves (anti-bacterial) over the crabs. Steam over high heat for 10-15 minutes, and switch off the heat. Leave the crabs to settle for five minutes. Serve with sweet black vinegar and more shredded ginger.

Mud crabs

Unlike the freshwater hairy crabs, you really need to clean these mudflat-dwelling green crabs.

You have to kill the crabs with a quick chop with the heel of your cleaver. Aim at the point just above where the tip of the belly flap meets the body.

Cut off the claws first for your own safety. Then prize the body away from the shell and remove the gills or dead man's fingers — they can harbor parasites. Scrub the outside of the shell well and remove the octagonal stomach, just below the mouth.

Chop each half of the body into two.

If you are steaming the crabs, lay the shell at the bottom of a steaming plate, then arrange the claws and body parts on top. The upturned shell will catch the juices.

Remember to crack the hard shell of the claws so they cook better. It will also make them easier to eat. You can add julienned ginger, spring onions and chili on top of the crab.

Steam over high heat for 15-20 minutes.

If you would like to cook the crabs in sauces, it helps to deep-fry the crab pieces to seal the juices. Just drop the crab into hot oil for maybe two minutes before taking them out to drain.

Spring onions and ginger stir-fry

- 10-20 ginger slices
- 2-3 stalks spring onions, cut into lengths
- 2-3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon Chinese wine
- Salt and pepper

A slurry of 1 tablespoon corn starch in 1/2 cup water

Heat up wok and fry garlic till colored. Add ginger and spring onions and stir-fry over high heat till fragrant.

Add deep-fried crab pieces and cook covered for five minutes. Drizzle the wine down the side of the wok, add the starch slurry and toss well to coat everything. Stir-fry with the cover off for another five minutes, adjust seasoning and plate.