

**December 2006**  
**Dive into Dungeness**  
**By Katy Budge**

*(About Dungeness crab ... crabby factoids ... buying crab  
... some potent potable pairings  
... the photo is from Pike Place Market in Seattle.)*



For many Central and Northern Californians, 'tis the season to celebrate. No, not the holidays, but Dungeness crab season! This year, the crabbing got under way in mid-November, just in time for Dungeness fans to enjoy a Thanksgiving tradition as ubiquitous as turkey and pumpkin pie.

Alaska may have its King crab, and the East Coast may have its Blue crabs, Stone crabs, and soft shell crabs, but hard core seafood fanatics everywhere wistfully give respect to Dungeness. It's meatier than other crabs, and is sweeter tasting as well.

That Dungeness is so incredibly delectable to our taste buds is perhaps a repudiation of "you are what you eat." Let's face it, crabs – the revered Dungeness among them – are essentially the Roombas of the oceans. Though they can get some nutrients from filter feeding, crabs rely on scavenging for their food, and their noshing can even include other crabs.

But let's move on to happier thoughts, shall we? Perhaps first and foremost is the fact that even in this time of forecasted doom and gloom for the health of ocean fisheries, you can enjoy your Dungeness virtually guilt-free. It's listed as a "Best" choice on the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Program and an "Eco Best" choice on Environmental Defense's Oceans Alive list. Indeed, Dungeness are considered one of the nation's most sustainable resources.

The reason for that may be two-pronged: yes, Dungeness are the most abundant crab found off the West Coast, but the resource has also responded well to management protections. Only adult males may be taken, they must be approximately six inches across (the exact width varies according to area), and typically a crabber must be in possession of an accurate measurement device. One website I looked at even cautioned that "a dollar bill is not an accepted way to measure legal size."

Given the species' health and popularity, Dungeness can translate into some good dollars for fishermen (and women). The crabs are found from the Aleutian Islands south to the Central Coast, with financial significance for almost every fishing port north of Santa Barbara. However, because it is a winter season catch, availability is highly dependent on weather (as with all fishing, really!).

Locally, the current supply of Dungeness is looking good, said Mark Tognazzini, aka Captain Mark of the Bonnie Marietta, Tognazzini's Dockside Restaurant, and Dockside Fish Market in Morro Bay. In keeping with their philosophy of supporting the local fleet, the market currently has all locally caught Dungeness in their tank.

"Right now through January or so is when you'll see the lower prices," said Tognazzini, "but we can see our local season easily go into May, if it's a traditional year, and often our best season comes late." Though the crabs can be available almost all year round from other areas, Tognazzini explained that those crabs understandably have higher mortality rates due to the pressures of transportation, "so you have to compensate for that by charging more."

Personally, I'm a huge proponent of buying direct from a locally owned fish market, or even right off the boat from a crabber. In the first place, you'll be getting a crab that's probably still alive when you buy it, and therefore as fresh as you can possibly get it. Also, as with any product, the more middlemen, the less profit for the original purveyor. Even though crabbers irked consumers a couple years ago with their fishing holdout (though the lack of Thanksgiving Dungeness certainly got people's attention), keep in mind that while you may be paying as much as \$8/pound for Dungeness in a traditional store, the fisherman might have received less than \$2/pound. As Tognazzini simply explained, "when you buy direct, the fishermen get more and the consumer pays less." Win-win.

#### Dungeness facts ...

The Latin name for Dungeness is Cancer magister, which essentially means "master crab" in Latin.

The crab gets its familiar moniker from from the town of Dungeness, Washington, now called Old Town Dungeness, or just Old Town, and the annual Dungeness Crab and Seafood Festival is held annually in nearby Port Angeles on the second weekend of October.

Prior to 1974, the Dungeness was commonly referred to as "market crab" in California.

Factors that help maintain the species' viability as a commercial resource:

The male Dungeness typically reaches sexual maturity a year before reaching legal harvesting size; a female Dungeness may carry in excess of 2-1/2 million eggs; and females are protected from ever being commercially harvested.

#### Cooking Dungeness ...

Buying:

With live crabs, look for one that's active; with pre-cooked crabs, avoid those with shell cracks. Legal crabs run about 1-1/4 pounds (though they can get up to three pounds), so figure on about one average-sized crab for every two people.

Cleaning, aka "backing":

"Simply" remove the back, break the crab in two, shake out the viscera, and remove the gill filaments. Okay, I admit I'm a wimp and have never done this myself, so if you're like me, you can ask the market or crabber to do this for you, but please don't complain if they weigh the crab for price beforehand! What's removed isn't all that much, and if the buck you'll save is all that important to you, buck up and learn to do it yourself.

Cooking:

As with all seafood, freshness is an issue, so don't cook crabs that have been dead more than a couple hours before cooking. Typically, crabs are cooked in salted boiling water (about 1/4 cup salt/quart of water), but you can also use beer, crab boil seasonings, etc. Bring the water to a boil first, then place the crab in – yes, you can plop them live if they haven't already been backed – and boil about 15-20 minutes.

#### Dungeness Dishes Paired with Potent Potables ...

I'll always remember my first Dungeness: a friend from college said we were headed to the beach with steamed crab, Dijon mustard, a baguette, and Chardonnay – needless to say, I was hooked. When you're having Dungeness simply prepared like this, go for a rich wine such as an Edna Valley Chardonnay or a Vista Del Rey Pinot Blanc.

Crab cakes are a quintessential favorite, and depending on the ingredients, will go fabulously with everything from a crisp sparkling wine from Laetitia or an India Pale Ale (IPA) from Downtown Brewing. You probably have your own favorite recipe, but you can also check out Seattle chef/guru Tom Douglas's new book, *I Love Crab Cakes*.