



White sweet corn that Chesapeake City's the Tap Room serves dusted with Old Bay.

Three great crab houses within 90 minutes of Center City.

Hard-shell heaven lies due south

I love the quirky limitations of regional foodways. I really do. But our lack of destinations for good whole crabs — just as the crustacean season ebbs to its peak — has gotten me steamed up. How is it that Philadelphia is so close to the Chesapeake Bay, yet so far from its love of hard-shell culture?

Dainty crab cakes? We have plenty. But when it comes to the messy pursuit of whole critters piled high and all that they entail — the joyous sound of mallets crunching down, the tangy celery spice of Old Bay seasoning the air — Philadelphia has far too few places to indulge.

It's almost as if an invisible crab force field across the Delaware state line has prevented the little snippers from making their way north to our tables intact.

"You're from Pennsylvania?" I overheard owner Pat Keeler say to a friend at her Boondocks restaurant in Smyrna, Del. "Then I know you don't know how to pick a crab!"

Hey, I resemble that remark! But a guy can get out of practice if too many summers pass without diving in to explore the mysterious cranities of a crab's anatomy and rediscover where those jewels of sweet white meat are hiding. To pry them free, the ultimate crab-picker employs a combination of finely tuned brute force (*crack!*), a watchmaker's delicacy, a bayman's intuition to find the meat where he can't see it, and an extra measure of patience.

My first couple of victims, inevitably, got mauled. But halfway through the third, the knowing touch magically reappears, and what suddenly appears? A perfect plume of feathery white lumps clinging to the end of a leg like a paintbrush from the Chesapeake gods. A quick dip in drawn butter, then a swab in crackly Old Bay, and this one bite makes it all worthwhile: Waves of celery salt and clove red spice give way to decadent butter, and then the swelling oceanic richness of the crab itself that lingers.

Of course, the hunger for hard-shells is one satiated morsel-by-morsel over the course of hours, not minutes. And it'll stoke a tall thirst quenched by pitchers, not a meager pint, of beer. So be sure, if you make the effort to head south for a day-trip to hard-shell heaven, that you bring along some favorite friends to share the pile.

Here are three unique spots we discovered within an hour-and-a-half's drive of Center City that were worth the trip:

The Rivershack at the Wellwood

Beside the North East River in historic Charleston, Md., tucked behind the sprawling Wellwood yacht club that dates to the 1890s, the Rivershack is a crab hunter's ideal: the hidden local spot.

There are no reservations at this casual tavern, which opens its mural-painted dining room and



Chef Skip Hammes' menu makes the Rivershack one of the more versatile, wacky crab-house kitchens around.

sandy-beach-like outdoor patio from May to November. But there's little question why it's always packed.

The steamed crabs are first-rate and come cloaked in an earthy spice blend that chef Skip Hammes won't reveal. But it is the rest of Hammes' menu that really distinguishes this gem as one of the more versatile (and wacky) crab-house kitchens I've sampled.

Just a glance at the server's T-shirt ("We Fry It, You Buy It") states the dominant theme.

Hammes hasn't met a foodstuff he didn't want to deep-fry, whether it's chicken, cheesecake, mac 'n' cheese, or "slaw balls," the tangy cole-slaw fritters he has perfected over the course of years.

Those slaw balls (a.k.a. "mash bunnies") are better than they sound. But it's the fried chicken that is truly the Rivershack prize. Deeply brined, then rolled in a well-seasoned thin crust of corn meal and flour, it emerges from the vintage pressure-fryers incredibly zesty and crisp. It's even better,

though, when scattered among a pile of crustaceans in the Rivershack's \$29.99 all-you-can-eat crab-and-chicken special, as the crust takes on the extra Chesapeake flair of Old Bay rubbed off from the seafood.

Finish it off with a puddinglike scoop of "crock pot carrot cake," then enjoy the romantic glow of the patio's eco-tiki torches. They're fueled by recycled grease from the chicken fryers. At the Rivershack, even the ambience is deep-fried.

The Tap Room

Set amid the charming 19th-century clapboard cottages of Chesapeake City along the C&D Canal, the Tap Room is one of crab country's longest-standing classics. Step inside the diamond-shaped window-and-Permatone facade, take a look at the varnished wainscoting and old-school maritime decor, and you'll see a well-preserved time capsule back to 1981, when owner Generoso "Joe" Montefusco first moved in.



The Tap Room's famous garlic crabs, well worth the bath your hands will get in herby olive oil, garlic, and crab juice.

Sometimes, though, this kitchen seems to have gotten a bit long in the tooth. The soups are diner-grade and sloppy, with overcooked veggies and rubbery bits of seafood. The tepid soft-shell inside my sandwich was chewy. The fried oysters were too thickly breaded. And the homespun marinara sauce, made regularly by the Italian-born Montefusco, turned watery when combined with crab cakes (a Tap Room specialty) and a plate of poorly drained pasta.

The good news, though, is that if you order right, the Tap Room still has serious virtues. We peeled through some of the best U-peel shrimp I've eaten. A fishnet held a dozen steamed littlenecks, tender and perfect. And I've rarely savored white corn as sweet as the ears the Tap Room served dusted with a spicy rogue of Old Bay.

But the best single reason to visit, bar none, is to bathe in the Tap Room's famous garlic crabs. That is exactly the commitment you'll make when you dive into a tray of these crustaceans, which have been cleaned and sautéed in a pool of olive oil with fistfuls of chopped garlic. There's no avoiding the fragrant mess, so embrace it: The herby oil and garlic and crab juice will cover your hands with such a special glow. Just consider it an exotic — and exceptionally tasty — spa treatment.

It's a potentially Italian switch from the usual Old

Bay flavor (a very salty version of which the Tap Room also offers), and you're likely to savor it for hours to come. So, for a worthy respite of sweetness to punctuate this meal, stroll down to the nearby public green, where the tiny Canal Creamery (97 Vanderlyn Dr., 410-885-3030) is scooping some exceptionally rich, farm-fresh ice cream from Kilby Cream. After a main course of zesty crabs, can there be a more fitting dessert than a caramel-chocolate-cashew scoop of "Fear the Turtle"? I think not.

The Boondocks

Rule No. 1 of crab day-tripping is always — always! — call ahead to verify that your destination has plenty of crabs before making the journey. I did this faithfully, of course, before schlepping my brood all the way to Sambo's Tavern, a charmingly vintage crab shack on the Delaware side of the Chesapeake Bay, only to learn upon arrival that — ugh! — no children are allowed. (Contrary to Sambo's insistence, this was not mentioned on the phone.)

Rule No. 2: Don't panic! When in crab country, there's usually another steamer pot within sniffing distance, and thanks to a tip from Sambo's, we found one in the nearby boondocks. Literally. The Boondocks restaurant is aptly named, because this sprawling cinder-block hall is near Smyrna off a side road in the middle of a cornfield. Little surprise that it used to be a lodge for goose hunts.

It was my crustacean chase, though, that found its answer here, in the laid-back confines of these vast rooms, where huge groups at picnic tables slurped lime-green Swamp Water cocktails from tall Mason jars, and the happy sound of family shell-cracking filled the air. ("Just hold the mallet a little lower on the handle and whack it!" said the tattooed biker beside me, tenderly instructing his young daughter on crab-country life skills.)

I loved the creamy version of Boondock's crab chowder, with its sweet-corn-and-chile kick. The steamed shrimp were also worthy. Otherwise, this kitchen showed a bit less finesse on the menu extras than some of the others we visited, with a fryer working overtime on everything from bland green beans to an odd crab-cake-filled pastry called the "Krusty Krab" that was fried to a scary black.

But when it came to the steamed crabs themselves, these guys were as good as any, slightly small, but with a sweetness to the meat that defied any Maryland stereotypes against Delaware crabs. An additional dip of spicy vinegar added an extra dimension of tang to the usual garnishes of butter and extra Old Bay.

After downing my own half dozen, though, the most surprising part of the meal arrived at dessert: a genuine apple dumpling. This ball of caramelized cinnamon orchard fruit arrived inside a warm dome of fresh and flaky pastry beside two scoops of vanilla ice cream, and its homemade goodness made up for all the kitchen's earlier deep-fried sins. It was also a sweet finale to a journey that, despite some unexpected twists, was well worth the effort.

Next Sunday, Craig LaBan reviews Noble American Cookery. Contact him at 215-854-2682 or claban@phillynews.com.



A heap of hard-shells is delivered by Boondock's Michelle Grace. A dip of spicy vinegar adds tang to the meat, whose sweetness defies any Maryland stereotype against Delaware crabs.



At the Rivershack in Charlestown, Md., Joel Peters dives into the fried-chicken-and-crabs combo with his girlfriend, Cece Manley, her daughter Kayli (left); and his son Dylan. The deep-fryer works overtime here — even on cheesecake and mac 'n' cheese.

The Rivershack at the Wellwood

526 Water St., Charlestown, Md., 410-287-6866; www.wellwoodclub.com

Hours: 4-9 p.m. Thursday; 4-10 p.m. Friday; 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Sunday and Monday. Closed Tuesday and Wednesday.

Reservations not accepted.

The Taproom

201 Bohemia Ave., Chesapeake City, Md., 410-885-2344; www.taproomcrabhouse.com

Hours: 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday through Thursday; until 11 p.m. Friday through Sunday.

Cash only. Reservations for parties of 10 or more only. Wheelchair-accessible dining room (but not bathrooms).



The Swamp Water at the Boondocks in Smyrna, Del., helps wash down the steamed crabs.

The Boondocks

25 Lighthouse Rd., Smyrna, Del., 302-653-6962.

Hours: 4-9 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday; noon-9 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

All major cards but AmEx. Reservations for parties of six or more.

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Staff photographs by David Swanson

"Food" by Rick Nichols does not appear this week.