

SEASONS OF SEAFOOD

The fresh flavors of the Florida Gulf Coast
STORY MILES SAUNDERS

The boat parade begins nearly every afternoon as the sun dips low in the sky.

The sport fishermen come in. The commercial fishermen head out. A steady stream of crab, shrimp, and fishing boats ply the waters of the Crystal and Homosassa Rivers heading for the Gulf of Mexico.



Stone Crab fishermen from The Crab Plant, LLC.



"My dad, who was Charlie, bought this location in 1959. 'We're happy to continue...'"

— PHIL KOPFMEHL, CHARLIE'S FISH HOUSE



"Where can I find fresh local seafood," you ask? You've come to the right place.

Authentic Florida

The waterfronts of Homosassa and Crystal River have been home to fishing boats and fishermen for well over a century. The faces and architecture may have changed, but the trade remains.

On a busy October afternoon, small boats jockey for position off the little dock at Shelly's Seafood and Fish Market on the Homosassa River waterfront. It's Stone Crab season and big boats or little, it doesn't matter. The



Stone Crab Chowder

"It doesn't get any fresher than that."

— DARCI KNECHT, WILD SASSA SEAFOOD TRAILER

little fish market is humming with fishermen bringing baskets of fresh crab claws in one door and customers toting bags full of them out the other.

Across the little parking lot, Darci Knecht has already picked through 40 pounds of claws as she stirs a huge pot of Stone Crab chowder. With the fishing boats lining the docks, the Fish Market and Darci's Wild Sassa Seafood Trailer, you might call it the Seafood triangle. "Stone Crabs literally go from the boat right into Shelly's and then right over here," she laughs. "It doesn't get any fresher than that."

A few miles north on Kings Bay in Crystal

River, a similar scene plays out daily at the appropriately named Crab Plant, LLC. "I kind of call it dinner and a show," says Kelly Kofmehl as fishermen pass through the restaurant with bags full of crab claws and trays of fresh grouper. "We are still a working processing plant. Folks at the tables get to see what we're doing and they get to see it's fresh."

Kelly and his wife, Candy, are now the third generation of their family in the fishing business here. "I didn't choose it. It chose me," says Kelly. "I was born into it. My dad was a fisherman, and I was born and raised at that house



Shelly's Seafood & Fish Market in Old Homosassa.



A dinner cruise

"We really want for people to be able to have that authentic experience we so often enjoy. We serve the food right on the boat."

— CAPTAIN SEAN DAUGHERTY

right over there," he says motioning toward the restaurant's stunning view of the water.

"Through the summer months, blue crab is our staple," says Kelly, explaining the cycle of seasons. "Our big boats fish grouper in the summer and do stone crabs in the winter. Blue crabs are pretty much year-round, as are the mullet and snapper."

Generations

Across from The Crab Plant, Kelly's uncle, Phil Kofmehl, is weighing mullet and grouper on a dock at Charlie's Fish House and Seafood Market. "It just gets in your blood," says Phil who is still actively involved in running this local fresh seafood landmark. "My dad, who was Charlie, bought this location in 1959," he says as he feeds tarpon from a dock behind the

market. "We're happy to continue just as long as the Lord lets us."

Generations are important here. One generation picks up where the last one left off, and each contrib-

utes something new.

Back on the Homosassa River, Captain Sean Daugherty welcomes aboard a couple celebrating their anniversary. Like a lot of people here, he grew up on the water



Wild Sassa Seafood Trailer



Lunch by the water at The Crab Plant in Crystal River.



Local fishing captains at Greenhouse Bistro & Venue

COOK YOUR CATCH

No one really knows when it started, but for as long as anyone can remember, Cook Your Catch has been a tradition in this part of Florida.

More than 15 restaurants here offer the service, which includes preparing freshly caught and cleaned fish or scallops and providing all the fixings.

The practice is so popular with anglers and scallopers that even the newest restaurants offer it.

"We're a fresh food restaurant," says Craig Shatto of the Greenhouse Bistro & Venue, "so this fits."

The restaurant, located at the head-springs of the Hills River along U.S. Highway 19 in Homosassa, has quickly gained a stellar reputation for inventive fresh cuisine.

Today, along with the regularly updated menu items, Executive Chef Marc Bell is sautéing fresh scallops and grilling red snapper brought in by local fishing guides. He combines it with roasted asparagus and braised red cabbage with apples.

The steaming plates are greeted with oohs and aahs when Chef Marc brings them out. The guides happily dig in. "Food should be as close to its natural state as possible," says Cindy Shatto, "that's why we make pretty much everything from scratch."

If you're interested in Cook your Catch, check out our website, DiscoverCrystalRiverFL.com. Under Dining, click on Cook your Catch. Be sure to call ahead for price and policy.



and turned that knowledge into a trade as a respected guide. Tonight, it's a Mellow Mangrove Charters dinner cruise in collaboration with Wild Sassa.

"We really want for people to be able to have that authentic experience we so often enjoy," says Sean. "We serve the food right on the boat," he adds as he sets out toward the setting sun. "What you get depends on what's on the market that day. We make sure you're getting what's fresh."

Once the boat reaches the Saint Martins keys, Sean slides it into a gentle glide. In the distance, the sun touches the horizon. A champagne cork pops over a feast of mussels and Gulf shrimp. Laughter briefly breaks the evening calm as the sun slips away and twilight lingers.

It's the sumptuous ending to a perfect day as they turn for home. ☺