

# DINING OUT

By Bea and Ben Sorrencified

Here on the Crystal Coast, we have seen the number and kind of restaurants grow steadily during the past few decades. Our dining choices now rival those of many larger coastal and even inland areas. We can find close to a full range of dining options here, stretching from fast food to old-style coastal to gourmet and international cuisine. How fortunate we are to have sun, sand, sea—and great dining—on our coast.

For many years, the Carolina coast has been characterized by informal “waterside” restaurants. They are typically located on or near the water, and their menus have sustained diners who are looking for traditionally prepared (normally fried) seafood, whether in the “calabash” mode or otherwise. In more recent years, however, the otherwise has begun to take some surprising and delicious turns. Specifically on the Crystal Coast, we can enjoy several modern renditions of the traditional waterside restaurant. One of the local classics in this category is the Crab’s Claw, located on the ocean in Atlantic Beach. Its bill of fare offers some very interesting variations on traditional seaside dining.

The Crab’s Claw menu showcases seafood in many forms. The lunch menu, for example, includes an interesting list of seafood sandwiches—crab cake, grouper, flounder, salmon, shrimp or tuna. For landlubbers, the choices move to chicken breast and a half-pound burger, both served barbeque style. Beyond this, you may opt for a Cuban sandwich made with ham, pork, and Swiss cheese. Each sandwich is accompanied by a choice of customary side dishes, like coleslaw, green salad, onion rings, potato salad, sweet potato or French fries. There is something to satisfy most tastes in seaside sandwiches and their accompaniments.

If your lunch appetite goes more toward soup and salad, the Crab’s Claw can satisfy you as well. The soups include a “southern style” clam chowder

and, less traditionally, gazpacho (a cold soup originating in Spain that mixes summer vegetables and tomatoes), tortilla soup (“loaded with chicken, corn and rice, with a burst of cilantro and lime”) and black bean soup with crab claws (garnished with yellow rice and sour cream). The basic salad is a garden salad of baby greens, to which you may add grilled or blackened grouper, mahi-mahi, salmon or tuna.

Even more interesting, whether for lunch or dinner, are the Crab’s Claw’s entree salads. You may select among the tropical grilled shrimp salad (grilled jumbo shrimp on baby greens joined by tomato, cucumber and avocado encircled by pineapple-mango salsa), the “signature” blackberry chicken salad (chicken breast marinated in blackberry jam on baby greens with candied pecans, Portobello mushrooms and gorgonzola cheese tossed in a blackberry vinaigrette dressing) and the “coastal” Cobb salad (crab claw meat, avocado, bacon, egg, onions and gorgonzola cheese on baby greens).

The Crab’s Claw dinner menu is nothing short of a seafood lover’s delight. The appetizers offer many choices from the ocean, including specialty dips, bacon-wrapped scallops, chilled blue crab claws, coconut fried shrimp, conch fritters, peel-and-eat shrimp and local Harker’s Island crabs. Among appetizers with a gourmet touch, you can choose Caribbean curried shrimp or a green tomato and blackened shrimp dish.

The dinner entrees are a veritable banquet of seafood delights. On the plain-and-simple side, you can order blue-crab claws, lobster meat, lump crab meat, or shrimp nicely pan-fried in butter. If your taste leans toward seafood prepared in traditional New England style, you can select at market price one of the restaurant’s steamer pots, consisting of king crab, littleneck clams, shrimp and snow crab or the lobster pot for two, which includes two ten-ounce cold-water lobster tails, clams, shrimp and snow crab clusters. Both steamer pots include vegetables—carrots, celery, onions, red skin potatoes, and sweet corn “cobbettes.” They are served with house-prepared jalapeno cornbread. The lobster pot itself is accompanied by two green salads. Also available from the steam bar are a la carte selections of local littleneck clams, king crab legs, snow crabs legs and wild blue mussels from Maine.

But that’s not all. What may distinguish the Crab’s Claw from most of its seaside counterparts is its substantial list of chef’s entrée specialties with a Caribbean accent. Seafood offered in more traditional forms is also prepared in innovative ways, as it might be in the Caribbean islands. Grouper, for example, is rolled in an almond dredge, pan seared, topped with curried shrimp and served on a bed of baby greens. Salmon or mahi-mahi is presented over yellow rice with peas, accompanied with plantains sautéed in honey butter, topped with a sweet tropical sauce and garnished with a red curry sauce. For the increasing number of fresh tuna fans, the Caribbean specialties include blackened local tuna accompanied by pineapple-mango salsa and sautéed broccoli, then finished with a sweet roasted red pepper sauce and served over baby greens. Somewhat tamer specialties on the menu are traditional seafood paella served over yellow rice and peas and a house-made crab cake baked in a Portobello mushroom cap and presented over red crab primavera sauced penne pasta. Both are equally tempting.

For landlubbers who may have (perhaps reluctantly) accompanied seafood

devotees to the Crab’s Claw, fear not. The restaurant offers pork and beef selections “from the farm.” The landlubbers may choose a New York strip steak or a beef tenderloin filet or, if you prefer, barbequed baby back ribs or pork tenderloin. If you venture to blend land and sea, you may add shrimp or king crab legs to a beef order.

Dessert lovers will be glad to hear that dessert options vary from day to day, most if not all made in house.

Of course, at the Crab’s Claw you can complement your food with beer or wine. There is a long list of domestic and imported beers. On the wine list is a good selection of reds and whites by the bottle, as well as some by the glass. The wines come from California, Down Under and Western Europe. And if neither beer nor wine is what you want, you can enjoy any number of specialties from martinis to mojitos, including interesting tropical drinks.

The Crab’s Claw is located on the boardwalk in Atlantic Beach at 201 West Atlantic Blvd. It is open for business every day except on Wednesday from 11:30 a.m., but on Sunday opens “noon-ish.” Dinner is served beginning at 5:30 p.m. You can contact the restaurant at 726-8222 or at [www.crabsclaw.com](http://www.crabsclaw.com).

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