

Food & Dining

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For chef Tom Douglas,
getting famous was



A piece of cake

Crab-cake expert's new book is all about the 'American classic'

By Marian Betancourt

Associated Press

Years before he ever imagined he would own restaurants and write cookbooks, Tom Douglas sometimes went crabbing with his dad in the Chesapeake Bay.

"You put a chicken neck on a string and hang it from a pole over the bridge to catch blue crabs," Douglas said. He comes from a large Delaware family — he's the fourth of eight children — and prime fresh local crabmeat was too expensive to buy for home use. "That was a going-out treat," he said.

But even as a youngster, perhaps because of that early experience, Douglas' appreciation of food (and crab cakes) was keen. It led to his first job as a \$1.18-an-hour cook's helper at the Hotel du Pont in Wilmington, Del.

"My job was to open oysters and clams. I opened 400 oysters a day," he recalled in a phone interview from Seattle.

The chef there taught him important lessons he still follows for making crab cakes. "He said the No. 1 rule was being gentle. No stirring, only folding. The more you work them the tougher they get," he said.

Douglas established his own cooking career in Seattle, where he happily discovered that the Pacific Ocean offered up Dungeness crabs that were fabulously tasty, too.

Giving away some secrets

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Douglas, who used to go crabbing with his dad in the Chesapeake Bay when he was a boy, serves up a freshly cooked crab cake at Palace Kitchen, one of his four restaurants in Seattle. Crab cakes are 'a national phenomenon,' Douglas says.

Elaine Thompson/Associated Press

Giving away some secrets

Now, at 47, more than 25 years, four restaurants, a radio show, a catering business, and three cookbooks later, the James Beard Award-winning chef is teaching some of his secrets in "I Love Crab Cakes!" subtitled "50 Recipes for an American Classic" (William Morrow, 2006, \$19.95).

When he graduated from high school, Douglas said, "I wanted to try something new. I drove across the country and ran out of gas and money in Seattle." That was in 1977. He thought it was only a temporary stint when, following his natural instinct, he got a job in a

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- Chesapeake Bay Classic Crab Cakes
- Etta's New Dungeness Crab Cakes

hotel kitchen there. Restaurants always need workers, he said.

"To this day the hardest thing it to find good cooks," Douglas said. "Then I learned if you want to make more money you have to be good at managing people."

He stayed with the restaurant life. After making his reputation

cooking at the city's Sport Cafe, Douglas, with his wife and business partner, Jackie Cross, opened his own restaurant in 1989 with money borrowed from his wife's uncle.

There followed three tough years, he said, blaming the name they chose for the restaurant. Driving through Astoria, Ore., they'd noticed that all the restaurants were called grills or cafes, but lounges had flower names.

In an effort to be original, Douglas said, they named their new restaurant Dahlia Lounge. "All

Cakes: Douglas says to use the best meat -

— and don't overcook

it," he adds, almost modestly.

"Twenty years later," he said, "crab cakes have become a national phenomenon."

His book celebrates their infinite variety. Along with his own recipes in "I Love Crab Cakes," there are some from other chefs, including Emeril Lagasse and Jacques Pepin, as well as from his mother, Mary Douglas, to whom the book is dedicated.

At the front of the book, Douglas gives the basics for making good crab cakes, whether with East or West Coast crabs; at the back are ideas for sauces and accompaniments.

Which crabs to use? According to the book, "I Love Crab Cakes!" features crabs from all over North America.

"For all of the recipes, blue crab, Phillips brand pasteurized crab, and Dungeness crab are interchangeable. Jonah crab and Peekytoe also work well. King crab, while you can chop and use it, will give a different texture."

Besides the first lesson about the prime importance of a gentle touch in mixing that Douglas learned as a youngster, what does he think are the other key things for home cooks to keep in mind for making good crab cakes?

No. 2. "Always buy the best crab meat. And forget about the term blue crab; today blue crab is a crab from Indonesia, so it's not the same thing as what comes from the Chesapeake. If you can't get fresh crab, try the pasteurized crab usually sold in the refrigerated case of your supermarket or fish store, such as Phillips brand, which is not to be confused with shelf-stable canned crab."

No. 3. "I'm tired of hearing people say they need to wait till the bread gets stale to make bread crumbs. You don't need stale bread with \$25-a-pound crab meat. Use fresh crumbs."

No. 4. Another mistake is to serve tartar sauce with a crab cake that has a mayonnaise binder. Douglas suggests a contrast such as green tomato sauce, or something else sharp and acidic to com-

plement the crab cake.

No. 5. "Don't overcook. Use a meat thermometer." He says 150 F to 155 F is the right temperature for doneness. If you overcook a mayonnaise-based crab cake, "the mayonnaise gets greasy, and the cake gets pasty."

Douglas' latest tribute to the lore of the crab cake: He is holding a contest at his restaurants through October to find the most popular kind — based on tallying up what customers order.

Here are recipes for two classics from Douglas' book.

The traditional crabmeat for these Chesapeake Bay Classic Crab Cakes is East Coast blue crab. But the recipe works with Dungeness crabs, Douglas said, although you will probably need to squeeze out the excess liquid. "If your Dungeness tastes salty, you may want to omit the salt in the recipe because there's already salt in the Old Bay Seasoning."

Traditionally, these cakes are served with tartar sauce, but Douglas prefers the tangy zip of green or red cocktail sauce to offset their creaminess.

Chesapeake Bay Classic Crab Cakes

Makes 8 large crab cakes (4 servings)

1 large egg yolk (see note)
 1 tablespoon Old Bay Seasoning
 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
 ½ teaspoon grated lemon zest
 1½ teaspoons fresh lemon juice
 1½ teaspoons cider vinegar
 ½ cup peanut or canola oil
 ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
 ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
 1 tablespoon minced scallions, both white and green parts
 1 pound lump blue crabmeat drained and picked clean of shell
 4 cups fresh bread crumbs
 ¼ cup chopped parsley
 About 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
 Red cocktail sauce
 4 lemon wedges

Put the egg yolk, Old Bay, mustard, lemon zest and juice, and vinegar in the bowl of a mini-food processor or a blender and process until smooth.

Gradually pour in the oil with the machine running until the mixture emulsifies and forms a mayonnaise.

Season with the salt and pepper.

Transfer the mayo to a bowl and, using a rubber spatula, fold in the scallions and the crabmeat until well combined.

Combine the bread crumbs and the parsley in a shallow container.

Form the crab mixture into 8 patties about 3 inches wide and ¾-inch-thick and drop them into the bread crumb-parsley mixture. Dredge the crab cakes on both sides. If you have time, leave the crab cakes in the container of bread crumbs, cover with plastic wrap, and chill for an hour or more.

When you are ready to fry the crab cakes, put 2 large nonstick skillets over medium heat. Add about 2 tablespoon butter to each pan. When the butter is melted, add 4 crab cakes to each pan, patting off excess crumbs first. Slowly fry the crab cakes until they are golden brown on both sides and hot through, turning once with a spatula, about 4 minutes per side. If the crab cakes are brown too quickly, reduce the heat. The internal temperature of a cooked crab should be 155 F on an instant-read thermometer.

Transfer crab cakes to plates, 2 per person, and serve with your choice of sauce and lemon wedges.

Note: To use this recipe for crab cakes that are broiled, but not breaded, use 2 egg yolks, make the crab cake mixture, and shape into 8 cakes. Omit dredging in bread crumbs. Refrigerate for 1 to 4 hours or overnight. Arrange the cakes in a pan and broil until they're hot through and lightly golden brown, 5 to 6 minutes, rotating the pan as needed to brown the cakes evenly.

Note: In a note on egg safety, Douglas writes: "Use very fresh Grade A or Grade AA eggs (check the expiration date on the label before buying) and always keep the egg refrigerated. It's important to be aware of the potential dangers of salmonella and other harmful bacteria that may occur in eggs and take precautions. Don't keep eggs at room temperature for more than an hour, and always wash your hands, work surface and equipment before and after using raw eggs. Use products that have been made with raw eggs within one day."

Season with the salt and pepper.

Transfer the mayo to a bowl and, using a rubber spatula, fold in the scallions and the crabmeat until well combined.

Combine the bread crumbs and the parsley in a shallow container.

Form the crab mixture into 8 patties about 3 inches wide and $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-thick and drop them into the bread crumb-parsley mixture. Dredge the crab cakes on both sides. If you have time, leave the crab cakes in the container of bread crumbs, cover with plastic wrap, and chill for an hour or more.

When you are ready to fry the crab cakes, put 2 large nonstick skillets over medium heat. Add about 2 tablespoon butter to each pan. When the butter is melted, add 4 crab cakes to each pan, patting off excess crumbs first. Slowly fry the crab cakes until they are golden brown on both sides and hot through, turning once with a spatula, about 4 minutes per side. If the crab cakes are brown too quickly, reduce the heat. The internal temperature of a cooked crab should be 155 F on an instant-read thermometer.

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Chesapeake Bay Classic Crab Cakes

These next cakes, the most popular crab cake at Etta's restaurant, are soft and need at least an hour's chilling time before pan frying.

Etta's New Dungeness Crab Cakes

Makes 8 large crab cakes (4 servings)

- 1 large egg yolk
- 1 tablespoon cider vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped red bell pepper
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped onion
- 3 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons chopped parsley
- 1 teaspoon Tabasco
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon paprika
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon chopped fresh thyme
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon kosher salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sour cream
- 1 pound fresh Dungeness crabmeat, drained, picked clean of shell, and lightly squeezed if wet
- 4 cups fresh bread crumbs
- About 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- Green cocktail sauce
- 4 lemon wedges

In a mini-food processor, combine the egg yolk, vinegar, mustard, bell pepper, onion, the 2 teaspoons of parsley, Tabasco, paprika, thyme, salt and pepper. Pulse to finely mince the vegetables and combine all the ingredients.

With the motor running, slowly add the oil through the feed tube until the mixture emulsifies and forms a thin mayo.

Transfer the mayo to a large bowl and stir in the sour cream, then use a rubber spatula to fold in the crabmeat. Gently form 8 patties, about 3 inches wide by $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch thick.

Put the bread crumbs in a shallow container and mix in the 3 tablespoons parsley. Lightly dredge the patties on both sides in the bread crumbs. Cover the crab cakes with plastic wrap and chill for at least 1 hour or longer.

Put two large nonstick skillets over medium heat and add about 2 tablespoons butter to each pan. When the butter is melted, add 4 crab cakes to each pan. Gently fry the crab cakes until they are golden brown on both sides and hot through, turning once with a spatula, about 4 minutes per side. The internal temperature should be 155 F.

Transfer the crab cakes to plates, serving 2 to each person, accompanied by ramekins of green cocktail sauce and lemon wedges.

Recipes adapted from "I Love Crab Cakes" by Tom Douglas with Shelley Lance, William Morrow, 2006, \$19.95.