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Crawfish Étouffée: A Recipe For A Southern Celebration

When Carnival ends, a new reason to party in Louisiana is right behind it: Crawfish season!

Joanna LeRoy
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It's crawfish season, y'all! To help celebrate (and yes, crawfish season *should* be a holiday in its own right), we cooked up our own lip-smacking **Crawfish Etouffee recipe**, with help from chef and New Orleans native **Brittany Conerly**.

We admit crawfish (or crayfish to you Yankees) isn't a staple in every supermarket. So where do you get it? How do you cook it? And, well, what *is* it, anyway? Read on...

Crawfish 101

Crawfish, also known as crayfish, crawdads/daddies, or mudbugs, are freshwater crustaceans that make their homes in the muddy river bottoms and swamps of Louisiana. In fact, the crawfish is so important here, it's been named the "official state crustacean" (an honorary title shared with Maine lobsters, Maryland blue crabs, and Texas Gulf Shrimp). And no wonder: the state produces 90-95% of all the crawfish in the US.

Crawfish are most closely related to Maine lobsters — one look and it's easy to see how. They resemble small lobsters, typically growing only a few inches long. Because of this, the yield of meat in a single crawfish is not so great: It takes about seven pounds of live crawfish to yield about one pound crawfish tails, the part typically used in recipes like étouffée.

What Do Crawfish Taste Like?

Of course, the best way to figure out what crawfish taste like is to go ahead and take a bite! But if you're not ready to commit, here's what you can expect: Both delicate and succulent, crawfish are more tender than shrimp, with a distinctive flavor most similar to Maine lobster. As seafood (yes, all crustaceans are considered "seafood" even if they live in fresh water), they're typically mild and will take on the flavors of whatever they're cooked in ... so crawfish most often taste like spicy Cajun seasonings.

Like all animals, their habitat affects how they taste: as a freshwater species, they won't have any of the salty undertones that you might find in lobster or bivalves (e.g., clams, mussels, oysters). Some folks complain of a muddy taste in crawfish from their time burrowed deep in the river bottoms, but crawfish connoisseurs argue that this is the result of poor preparation, and not a characteristic taste.

When Is Crawfish Season?

Crawfish can start to appear as early as November after the farmed fields are flooded in late September. The peak season for crawfish (and the best time to buy it fresh) is from March-May, with the harvest winding down in late June/early July.

Once the season ramps up, you'll start seeing crawfish festivals (like the famed **Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival**) popping up throughout the South featuring the granddaddy of all crawfish preparations: the crawfish boil. Similar to a Carolina Lowcountry boil, a Maryland crab boil, or New England lobster boil, the crawfish boil is a complete boiled feast of seafood, potatoes, and corn, flavored with regional spices, onions, and bay leaves. The finished goods are dumped out on a table covered with newspapers, and hungry guests dig in with their bare hands, tearing the bodies in half, sucking out the juices from the heads and deftly removing the shell to get at the prized tail meat. In addition to the spicy potatoes and corn, you'll find beer and Zydeco music are favorite accompaniments to the festivities. In April, the Bacchanalian fest comes to a crescendo, with crawfish boils being a favorite way to celebrate Good Friday in the American South.

But crawfish lovers aren't content to wait around for a big party to get their fill of the stuff. Crawfish is featured in a variety of traditional Louisiana dishes throughout the season, from jambalaya to beignets to gumbo, and of course, crawfish étouffée. Some of our favorite dishes include:

Crawfish Monica

DEEP SOUTH DISH

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Creamy Crawfish Dip

THE KITCHN

Crawfish Burgers

LOUISIANA COOKIN'

Crawfish Beignets with Cajun Dippin…

THE COOKING BRIDE

Crawfish Jambalaya

SPICY SOUTHERN KITCH…

Crawfish Pie

LOUISIANA COOKIN'

★★★★★

Where Can You Buy Crawfish?

If you don't live in Louisiana, this is probably the first question on your mind as you start drooling over these recipes. Where *do* you get crawfish? Fortunately, crawfish freezes well and can be found year-round throughout the U.S. It's been reported to be available at Whole Foods, Asian markets like HMart, and local seafood markets. If you aren't able to find it locally, Louisiana crawfish tails can be ordered online; two popular sources are **Cajun Grocer** or **Louisiana Crawfish**. When shopping, do look at the origin of the crawfish: The Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program (**seafoodwatch.org**) recommends avoiding crawfish from China, preferring U.S.-sourced crawfish, preferably from Louisiana.

If you're buying live crawfish, you'll need to keep them cold (in the low 40s) and cook them as soon as possible after purchasing, holding for no more than 24 hours. Bigger is not always better: Small to medium-sized crawfish actually yield a higher proportion of meat to body weight and are somewhat easier to peel than large crawfish. Crawfish need oxygen to stay alive, and can actually drown if stored submerged in water. Instead, keep them in a cooler, covered with ice, with the lid cracked so air can get in.

Throw out dead crawfish before boiling; after cooking, take a look at the tails of your crawfish. If the tail is straight, not curled, this may indicate that the crawfish was dead before it was cooked and shouldn't be eaten. Ultimately, you can tell if the crawfish is good by the texture of the meat inside — if it's at all mushy, it was most likely dead before being boiled.

If you're making étouffée (or any of the preparations other than a crawfish boil), it's easier to find and use frozen crawfish tails. Frozen tails are typically par-boiled before freezing, and may or may not have the fat removed. While the fat on the tails is good for adding flavor to your finished dish, it does shorten the shelf life of the tails. Tails with fat can go rancid fairly quickly, even when frozen, so check the dates on the package carefully before buying.

So have we whetted your appetite enough? Are you ready to start making étouffée? Here's everything you need to know about this classic dish.

All About Étouffée

Étouffée (pronounced "ay-too-fay") is a traditional Southern comfort food most often associated with New Orleans, but found throughout Louisiana and the coastal South. Like much of Southern fare, étouffée recipes are very regional, with strong ties to the history of the area — and therefore are subject to heated debate around whether a certain preparation is "authentic."

The word "étouffée" is a French word meaning "smothered," and refers to the method used to cook the seafood with vegetables and sauce to make a thick stew that's served over rice. Étouffée is a one-pot meal, which is typical of Cajun cooking, as meals were often cooked out in the fields.

The dish takes cues from both Cajun food and Creole cooking and may be considered "more Cajun" or "more Creole" based on the ingredients used in the recipe. In the **recipe Brittany developed**, for example, the étouffée takes on a Creole slant with the inclusion of tomatoes, a butter-based roux, and Creole spices. The étouffée gets multiple levels of heat from a combination of jalapeno peppers, liquid crab boil, cayenne pepper, and hot sauce. Worcestershire sauce and onions add savory depth of flavor, while fresh parsley, thyme, and chopped green onions add brighter notes.

What's The Difference Between Étouffée, Gumbo, and Jambalaya?

While these three classic dishes share similar flavor profiles and feature plenty of rice, there are distinct differences. In addition to the texture of the finished dish, one of the main differentiators has to do with how the rice is incorporated.

- **Gumbo**: A traditional gumbo is the thinnest preparation of the three dishes, and is often served as a soup course rather than a main. With gumbo, rice is served on the side. Gumbo starts with a dark roux but has many acceptable variations from there: seafood gumbo is common, as is a combination of chicken and sausage. Depending on the origin of the recipe, it may be thickened with okra or filé (ground leaves from the Sassafrass tree), and may or may not contain tomatoes.
- **Jambalaya**: A cousin of paella, jambalaya is a rice-based dish made with sausage and vegetables. Because the rice is cooked right in the stew, it soaks up liquid as it goes, making jambalaya the thickest of these three dishes. Like gumbo, the proteins used in jambalaya can vary, however, it typically includes andouille sausage and any combination of shrimp, chicken, and/or pork.
- **Étouffée**: Étouffée is defined more by its cooking method than anything else. In étouffée, a thick sauce smothers proteins (most often seafood), which are then served on top of separately-cooked long-grain rice. Étouffées may or may not start with a roux, and may or may not include tomatoes.

So What Exactly *Is* Smothering?

No, smothering isn't a meaningless descriptor on a restaurant menu — it's a traditional Cajun cooking technique. At its most basic, smothering is a quick form of stovetop braising where a protein is covered with several cups of water or chicken stock, then cooked in a covered large skillet or Dutch oven. Smothered recipes typically include the "holy trinity" of green peppers, onions, and celery, with or without tomatoes, which form a thick sauce when cooked down over low heat. Pork, chicken, and beef all lend themselves to this cooking technique.

Country Smothered Pork Chops

YUMMLY

★★★★½

Smothered Chicken

JAKE SMOLLETT

★★★★★

Emeril's Onion and Pepper Smothered...

BITTERYUM

★★★★½

While smothering conjures images of unhealthy cream-based sauces and piles of melted cheese, étouffée is not an unhealthy dish — just take a look through the ingredients. The one item to watch out for is the butter, but there's less than a half cup butter in the entire recipe. Unlike a southern gravy, for example, this sauce doesn't contain any cream or milk; in fact, the bulk of étouffée is comprised of lean, high-protein seafood, diced vegetables, and bold spices.

Key Ingredients In Étouffée

Seafood: Crawfish is the king of étouffée, but it's not the crown jewel of all étouffées. Can't find crawfish, or looking for a more affordable alternative? Shrimp make an excellent replacement. While it doesn't taste the same, shrimp étouffée is a delightful Southern dish in its own right. Less common (but hardly unusual) is chicken or sausage étouffée. Feel free to use your favorite protein in our recipe.

Smothering liquid: Just about any liquid can be used for smothering: chicken broth, chicken stock, or shrimp stock are all fine to use. In our recipe, we use chicken stock, but shrimp stock would help bump up the seafood flavor.

Spices: In this recipe, Creole seasoning is used to bring the traditional New Orleans flavor to the dish. Cajun seasoning can also be used; the primary difference between the two is that Creole seasoning tends to include more herbs, like oregano and thyme. Both types of seasoning typically include cayenne pepper, paprika, black pepper, and garlic powder. If you don't have Creole or Cajun seasoning in your spice cabinet, it's easy to make your own spice blend: This Creole-Cajun Seasoning recipe is a Yummly favorite.

Roux: Preparing a roux is a classic French technique for thickening stews and sauces. It's a simple mixture of flour cooked in butter, oil, or lard (measured in equal parts by weight). Depending on how the roux will be used, it may be cooked very quickly, until barely golden (blond roux), or may be cooked for quite a long time at a low temperature until it turns a deep, dark brown (brown roux). The longer the roux cooks, the more flavor you get from the toasted flour; however, as the sauce darkens and the flavor gets richer, the thickening power decreases.

While it has a fancy name, a roux is quite easy to make. In this recipe, you'll melt butter over medium heat, then whisk in some all-purpose flour and cook just until it starts to smell nutty and develops a peanut-butter brown color. This will make a more traditional Creole roux since it uses butter, as opposed to a Cajun roux which is made with oil and is cooked until dark chocolate in color.

Vegetables (a.k.a. The "Holy Trinity"): Like many cuisines, Louisiana cooking often starts with a classic mix of three vegetables. Green bell peppers, onion, and celery form the basis for myriad recipes in the Cajun-Creole tradition and are referred to both locally and beyond as "the holy trinity of Cajun cooking." It's quite similar to the French mirepoix of carrots, onions, and celery cooked in butter, or a Spanish sofrito, which combines onions, tomatoes, and garlic cooked in olive oil. The Cajun trinity is not only the base for our étouffée, but it's also the foundation for gumbos, jambalayas, red beans and rice, and more.

Crab Boil Liquid Seasoning: As its name indicates, this ingredient is primarily used in crab and shrimp boils, but is a wonderful way to add Cajun spice to all sorts of dishes. It's a powerful and spicy seasoning blend, so it's best to start off with a light hand and add more as needed. Typically a single capful is all that's needed for an entire stock pot of boiling seafood and potatoes! The most common brand found is Zatarain's from New Orleans; if you can't find it in your grocery store, it can be ordered online. Once opened, it can simply be stored in the cupboard, and a single bottle will last for a long time. After you've made étouffée, there are so many more dishes to try with this New Orleans spice: It's great with potatoes, boiled shrimp, cajun stews, dill pickles, Cajun peanuts — we've even seen a splash added to chocolate lava cake to give it a kick!

Making Crawfish Étouffée

Photo by Brittany Conerly

With its eye-catching orange hue flecked with green herbs and chunks of succulent crawfish tails, our étouffée brings a Louisiana party into your own home. No need to make an all-day event out of it — this étouffée comes together in under an hour. No, it's not a crawfish boil, but if you want to pair the meal with an American lager and Zydeco music, all the better.

Start by making a light brown roux with butter and flour. As the roux starts to brown, be sure to whisk frequently to prevent burning. The holy trinity goes in the pan next, along with spicy jalapenos, thyme, and garlic. These are cooked for just a few minutes to soften, and then comes the smothering ingredients — chicken stock, diced tomatoes, liquid crab boil, and Worcestershire sauce — along with your spices (cayenne pepper, Creole seasoning, garlic powder, and salt). This cooks down for about 20 minutes, which allows it to form a nice thick sauce for those tasty crawfish.

The last things to go in the pot are the crawfish, some lemon juice, a couple splashes of hot sauce, and some fresh parsley and green onions. A mere fifteen minutes later, remove from the heat, finish with a pat of butter, and you're ready to eat!

To serve, mound some medium or long grain white rice in the center of a shallow bowl, and spoon the étouffée over and around the rice. Garnish with more parsley if you like, and feel free to serve with your favorite cornbread recipe to sop up the spicy sauce.

After the feast is done, you can freeze étouffée in 1-2 cup airtight plastic containers — just be sure to let it cool down a bit before freezing to avoid the formation of ice crystals. Just be sure to let someone else clean up the dishes — after all it's just one pot, and now it's *your* turn to be celebrated.

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Crawfish Étouffée

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Louisiana Southern Cooking Etouffee Crawfish Dinner

Jalapeños Main Dish Mardi Gras One-Pot Meal Seafood

Shrimp Spicy Spring