



# PINCH. PEEL. EAT. REPEAT.

By Claudia Alarcón Photography courtesy of Pinch Boil House

*Crawfish boils may be better associated with Louisiana, but the early springtime tradition has deep roots in Texas. From February to mid-May, crawfish are plentiful and readily available in seafood shops and at some area restaurants. In San Antonio, two chefs with completely different cultures share their take on the convivial occasion.*

Southerleigh's Executive Chef and owner Jeff Balfour is a 4th generation native of the Texas Coast, where crawfish season is wildly anticipated. "Growing up on Galveston Island, seafood was always a part of our life, and while shrimp reigns supreme in Galveston, there was always a great deal of excitement when crawfish season came around," says the chef. "My family would do crawfish boils often, and it was probably my favorite of all. I would get stuck peeling a lot of the crawfish — shrimp and crab, too — because I was fast. This was a foundation in my early years, showing signs of wanting to be a cook."

One of Balfour's favorite memories of the boils were the smells coming from the stained white igloo coolers as they opened them up to begin to eat. Seeking to recreate this fond memory, he had custom seafood boilers built into the bar at the kitchen at Southerleigh, where shrimp boils are on the menu year-round and crawfish make an appearance as soon as the season kicks off. "We use these to do our seafood boils to order," says the chef. "The action and the aromas resulting from having them built right into the bar add a fun element that we enjoy, keeping close to our Texas Coastal roots."

In Houston's Asian communities, crawfish boils have become staples, and Viet-Cajun crawfish has even made its way to New Orleans and California. Sean Wen and Andrew Ho, owners of Pinch Boil House in San Antonio, have jumped in the action with their own signature boils. At Pinch, they first boil the crawfish in a special broth filled with spices and seasonings. Once the crawfish has been boiled to perfection, they toss it in different Southeast Asian sauces.

"Since our kitchen team is from, and has experience with, many countries all over Southeast Asia, we are able to bring to life many authentic and diverse flavors that customers typically don't see at a seafood restaurant," they say. With staff hailing from countries such as Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, their sauces include ingredients such as lemongrass, fresh garlic, scallions, limes, coconut milk, fish sauce, curry pastes and Thai chilis. Other Viet-Cajun cooks pour melted butter, lemon and chopped garlic over the freshly boiled crawfish as a finishing sauce.



"Growing up as Asian Americans in Texas along the Gulf Coast, seafood and home-cooking were an essential part of our upbringing," says Wen. "Since many immigrants from Southeast Asia were fisherman and boat people, it was only natural that they brought their



## BIY (BOIL IT YOURSELF)

There are many schools of thought regarding the proper way to boil crawfish, but there are also main guiding principles on which everyone agrees.

- Crawfish boils are messy affairs, best suited for the outdoors. Crawfish boilers with a basket insert and propane burners can be purchased at Academy. You will also need a large picnic table, plenty of newspapers to cover it, several rolls of paper towels, and a large garbage can or two with a plentiful supply of bags.
- Crawfish prices, quality and availability will vary every season. Usually, all the necessary spices are available wherever you purchase your crawfish. Some good brands of Louisiana boil spices are Zatarain's, Louisiana Boil and Swamp Fire. Traditionally, crawfish boils include whole red potatoes, corn-on-the-cob, whole onions and whole heads of garlic. Some people add fresh lemon halves for extra flavor.
- Crawfish must be purged and thoroughly washed before boiling. At home, people usually place them in a plastic kiddie pool or a large ice chest, cover them with water and add a whole pound of salt. This forces them to purge themselves of impurities. Next, place them in the basket insert of the crawfish boiler and rinse with a garden hose for about five minutes to remove all the seaweed and mud.
- To cook, boil all the vegetables first, adding seasonings and aromatics to taste. Add the crawfish, and when they come to a rolling boil, let them go for 3-8 minutes, depending on size. Turn off the flame, cover and steep them for about 20 minutes before dumping on the newspaper-covered table.
- Wash down with plenty of cold beer.

cooking techniques and recipes with them. For us, this type of food is not a forced fusion but rather just the way we, our parents and grandparents have been eating for generations."

For Wen, crawfish boils are the quintessential family and friends' occasion.

"From the cheerful bonhomie among your table mates, to the spicy, lip-tingling sensation you all will share, nothing quite compares. If you ever find yourself in Texas during crawfish season, do yourself a favor and get down to a crawfish boil!" ♦