

Crab Enthusiast

Specializing in fresh, cooked Alaska Red King Crab, The Crab Broker's owner and President Rob George reveals how to spot the perfect crab. **By Kathryn Jones**



» The Crab Broker says the key to quality, gourmet crab is not in the way the product is cooked, rather, it's in the way the crab is processed.

Most seafood aficionados would agree that crabs are delicious. But the key to a crab's deliciousness is not necessarily the way it's cooked, says Rob George, owner and president of Las Vegas-based The Crab Broker. It's the way it's processed. "Every crab is created equal when it's out there swimming around, but where the difference lies is in the recipe in which the crab is processed," he explains.

In 1992, George and his wife, Debbie, pioneered the idea of shipping fresh, cooked Alaska Red King crab out of Alaska's Dutch Harbor to chefs around the country. The two initially operated a retail fish market in Santa Cruz, Calif., later earning a reputation for supplying live Dungeness crab. "I didn't want to buy cooked crab from anybody," George recalls. "I wanted the best crab, so I flew live Dungeness crab from Alaska to San Jose, where I drove out, took them back to Santa Cruz, put them in the tank and sold them fresh, cooked in my store."

company profile

The Crab Broker

www.crabbroker.com

Headquarters: Las Vegas

Employees: 7

Specialty: Alaska Red King crab

Rob George, president and

owner: "When I started this business in 1992, everybody thought I was crazy and not many people gave me the chance to succeed."

Making Seafood History

An advocate of Alaskan seafood, George was looking for additional sources for live Dungeness crab when he came across a gentleman shipping Red King crab from Dutch Harbor to Anchorage. "He said, 'I don't do Dungeness crab,'" George notes. "And I wasn't interested in King crab, but for some reason, we clicked and I flew out to Dutch Harbor to meet him."

It was the best business decision he ever made. "Alaska Red King crab is generally the most sought-after King crab in the world," George says. "Then, to take it a step further and provide fresh, cooked Red King crab was unprecedented. There was absolutely nobody else doing that."

Sourcing and supplying fresh, cooked

Alaska Red King crab became such a substantial portion of the Georges' business, the couple closed down their fish market and solely concentrated on their crab program. Today, The Crab Broker sells between 175,000 and 200,000 pounds of fresh Red King crab annually, which is harvested between October and January. It also operates a frozen crab distribution business, supplying thousands of pounds of frozen Red King crab to restaurants and retailers across the nation year-round.

Chronicles of the Crab

Crabs go through a significant production process before they are placed on the consumer's plate, according to George, who says the best-tasting crab is processed using fresh water. "The plants that I have worked with for over 16 years are shore-based plants," he notes. "They are on the shore in the harbor and have fresh water at their disposal."

"If King crab is done properly, it is brought down to a really cold temperature before it goes into the brine tank for freezing," George explains. "You can only take fresh water to 32 degrees before it starts to freeze, but if you add salt to the water, you can bring the temperature down colder before freezing the crab. It takes less than a half a minute before the crab starts to freeze on the outside inward. As it starts to freeze, the crab creates a protective seal so the salt inside the brine tank doesn't get absorbed into the meat."

Fresh crab follows the same process, he adds, but with one difference. "I just place it in the brine tank for a minute or two to bring the temperature down instead of freezing it for a half hour," he says. "That way, when it's being shipped, the crab will arrive at a peak temperature. Alaska has really strict guidelines compared to other crab industries around the world. Live crab is held in live tanks built into the hulls of the crab vessels. Only live crab can be offloaded and processed."

"It's imperative that crab remain strong and live," George stresses. "As soon as that crab dies, the meat starts breaking



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down from the bacteria and the texture can totally go to oatmeal. The only crab processed in Alaska is live crab. You have to be sure you are processing live and processing properly with ample refrigeration capacity."

The Alaskan crab industry, along with the Crab Broker, promotes ethical and environmentally sound fishing practices. George likes to walk the talk by inviting his clients to Dutch Harbor every year to tour the boats and witness themselves how the crab is caught, offloaded and processed. Last year, about 50 individuals made the trip.

Imposters Not Welcome

The Crab Broker is a firm believer in total traceability. This is becoming increasingly important to restaurant owners, chefs and consumers, George points out. "They want to know where this crab is coming from," he says. "So when we do fresh, we label every box with the name of the crab vessel who harvested it."

"The industry standard is to process their King crab into clusters where the



body is cut in half and then you've got the claw and three legs," George continues. "One crab produces two clusters – one side and the other side. It's then frozen and shipped to Seattle, where it's cut up into single legs and claws, refrozen, repacked and sold."

The Crab Broker sells clusters, just like the fresh, cooked crab it distributes during the season. It produces a superior product, George asserts. "When I started my business doing fresh, cooked



>> The Crab Broker uses an efficient shipping system to ensure clients receive their crab shipments fresh and on-time. The company says its relationship with perishable foods distribution company Periship is its key to success. "Periship does all of my logistics and are the biggest reason why I've gotten to where I am today," President and owner Rob George says.



I had to deal with shipping fresh, cooked clusters to my customers because the processors never cut crab in Alaska," he says. "They ate it; they loved it, but they got it in a cluster form instead of single legs, so they had to prepare it differently than what they had in the past. But, it worked – people loved the quality of the crab and their businesses grew.

"They said, 'Can I get the same quality and great-tasting King crab frozen?' I said, 'Yes, but I can't get you single legs or claws.' I sell it the exact same way frozen as I do fresh." This means that when a customer receives a frozen shipment of crab in cluster form, it's usually a sign the product came from The Crab Broker, George says.

Crazy About Crab

The Crab Broker uses an efficient shipping system to ensure clients receive fresh crab shipments on time. George credits the company's relationship with perishable foods distribution company Periship to making this goal a reality. "Periship does all of my logistics and are the biggest reason why I've gotten to where I am today," he says. "I could have the greatest crab in the world and the greatest customers in the world, but if I can't get that crab to my customers on time and in great condition, my business wouldn't be worth anything."

George intends to broaden The Crab Broker's distribution network across international borders. "My dream is to distribute fresh and frozen King crab to other countries that have restaurants spread out and be able to deliver crab to every restaurant in that country on the same day," he says. "I also want to do some value-added products in forms that nobody has really done to any extent, such as crab meat and other value-added products – that's my ultimate dream.

"When I started this company in 1992, everybody thought I was crazy and not many people gave me the chance to succeed," George notes. "But, I've grown a great business, and I know people don't look at me like I'm crazy anymore." **FD**