

## My Idea of Fast Food - NYTimes.com

By MONIQUE TRUONG



Damijan Saccio

“Before any story of cooking begins, crime is inevitable,” warns “Murder in the Kitchen,” a chapter of “The Alice B. Toklas Cook Book.”

Channeling Dashiell Hammett, Toklas chronicles in blood-curdling detail her first encounter with a live carp, which ended up “killed, assassinated, murdered in the first, second, and third degree.” Toklas, often described as steely by visitors to Gertrude Stein’s Paris salon, was apparently less formidable in the kitchen: “Limp, I fell into a chair, with my hands still unwashed reached for a cigarette, lighted it, and waited for the police to come and take me into custody.” (Unorthodox punctuation seems to have prevailed in the Stein-Toklas household.)

This image of Toklas, fresh from the slaughter and on the verge of fainting, flashed before my eyes when my local fishmonger asked whether I wanted my four wiggling-fresh Chesapeake Bay blue crabs, newly molted and tender, to be “cleaned” at the store or whether I wanted to do it myself at home.

Here is the procedure, according to Maryland’s Department of Natural Resources: “Dressing or cleaning a soft crab is a simple. ... With a pair of scissors, cut off the mouth and face behind the eyes. Cut off the apron. Lift the top shell and snip out the lungs on each side. Run under cold water to clean. They are now ready to cook.” The euphemistic “cleaner” completes this task while the crabs are still alive. Bluntly put, it’s a vivisection.

If you are well acquainted with this technique and have, in fact, committed it, then you have more courage than I do.

My response, after the my vivid — albeit brief — visitation by Toklas, was a nervous giggle followed

by a gutless “No, you do it.”

May I recommend that you do the same, if presented with this choice? The preparation of these beautiful, succulent sea creatures is a breeze thereafter.

Soaked in milk to plump, coated in flour seasoned with only salt and black pepper, then pan fried in butter and olive oil until golden, soft-shell crabs are my idea of fast food. (In the winter months, I get the same speedy satisfaction from confit duck legs sizzling in a pan. Opening up a can of soup couldn't be easier.) I've read the soft-shell crab recipes that call for dashes of Tabasco in the milk, or a sprinkle of smoked Spanish paprika or Old Bay seasoning in the flour, but I think their sweetness is complemented best by simple ingredients. The butter, of course, will become a bit brown towards the end of cooking and lend an irresistible, toasted hazelnut flavor too.

A citrusy slaw of fresh fennel, green apples, pink grapefruit and fresh mint is a tart bright contrast to these beauties. A bit of freshly ground, toasted cumin gets on swimmingly with the lemon and grapefruit juice in the dressing, adding a bit of mystery to the otherwise straightforward, pristine march of flavors on the plate.

I think Toklas would approve, both of the dish itself and of my decision to leave the removal of face and lungs to a professional. After all, in the same chapter of her namesake cookbook, Toklas advises her readers that “food is far too pleasant to combine with horror.”

### **Pan-Fried Soft-Shell Crabs With Fennel and Green Apple Slaw**

*Serves 4*

1½ cups milk  
4 soft-shell crabs, cleaned  
¾ cup all-purpose flour  
kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste  
3 tablespoons olive oil  
3 tablespoons butter  
1 fennel bulb, julienned  
1 Granny Smith apple, julienned  
¼ cup fresh mint leaves, cut into a chiffonade  
1 pink grapefruit, sectioned  
6 tablespoons grapefruit juice  
1 tablespoon lemon juice  
2 to 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
½ teaspoon fleur de sel  
¼ teaspoon ground cumin (whole seeds, toasted and freshly ground)  
¼ teaspoon dried red pepper flakes  
freshly ground black pepper.

1. In a baking dish large enough to hold the crabs in a single layer, place the milk and crabs. Let them soak for 1 hour (refrigerate if the kitchen is warm).
2. While crab is soaking, prepare the dressing for the slaw. In a medium bowl, add the grapefruit juice (after you section the grapefruit, squeeze the remaining membrane, which should give you the 6 tablespoons), lemon juice, extra virgin olive oil, fleur de sel, cumin, dried red pepper flakes and black pepper. Whisk and set aside.
3. In a medium bowl, place the fennel and apple. Add the dressing and lightly toss to coat and set aside.
4. Drain the crab and discard the milk.

5. Season the flour with salt and pepper in a plastic or paper bag. Lightly dredge each crab in the flour. Do this immediately before you are ready to cook them.
6. Heat the oil and butter together in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat and fry the crabs until golden, about 4 to 5 minutes per side.
7. Place the pan-fried crab on a cooling rack, placed over a piece of foil or a cookie sheet.
8. Add grapefruit sections and mint to the slaw and toss lightly.
9. To serve, place some slaw (but not the dressing) on a plate and nestle a crab alongside. Serve immediately.