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A Crab Cake for All Seasons

By CHARLES PASSY

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Crabs are traditionally a summertime food, when varieties like the Maryland blue are at their peak. But many diners are eating them year-round in another form: the crab cake.

OUR RATINGS

We tested the offerings of five online crab cake vendors.

These patties, made from little more than crab meat, filler (mostly bread crumbs or crackers) and a few spices, have long been a regional favorite in Maryland. Specialty mail-order retailers say that business is up across the country. Chesapeake Bay Crab Cakes & More, a Baltimore company, says it sold five million crab cakes last year, including on the QVC shopping network. Sales have recently been growing 40% annually. Smaller vendors are also finding success: The Crab Place, based in Crisfield, Md., says it has shipped its crab cakes to all 50 states. Annual sales of the product have risen 33%, to about \$300,000, in the past year.

Using Imports

While many gourmets rank the Maryland blue crab as the sweetest source for the cake, vendors are substituting imported meat to keep up with year-round demand. "We use as much Maryland meat as we can," says Steve Cohen, chief executive of Astral Foods, the parent company of Chesapeake Bay. Still, he adds that the company supplements crab from sources world-wide.

Could a frozen, uncooked mail-order crab cake do the Old Line State justice? We tested the offerings from five online vendors to find out. The cakes all needed to be cooked in the oven or in a frying pan -- the method and cooking times varied slightly with each vendor, but the process was simple enough for all. Then we set the finished products in front of the two toughest judges we could find: Leslie and Kristi, two native Marylanders with plenty of crab-cake experience under their belts.

They didn't think the Champagne Crab Cakes from Omaha Steaks (\$60 for eight), with more cake than crab, came close to the real deal. "It's all filler," said Leslie. She also noted the cakes looked too perfect -- a true crab cake is a more misshapen affair, with visible pieces of lump meat, she said. Kristi simply commented, "I am so not a fan."

The Crab Place's entry, at \$70 for six, garnered higher marks. "I see the crab!" said Kristi. But there was some debate as to what piece of the crab we were seeing. Leslie thought the recipe relied a little too much on the stringier backfin variety rather than the succulent lump kind, though the meat was still deemed "flavorful."

More LumpThe Cadillac Crab Cake Co. ships its version in one big loaf, at \$59 for 36 ounces, rather than separate patties, like the others. We formed five baseball-size versions, which we thought were fairly attractive. "Oh, this is beautiful," said Kristi. The judges were generally approving of the taste and texture, as well as the backfin-to-lump ratio. Another plus: the cakes came with a tomato tartar sauce, though Leslie thought it was "a little too fancy." (Despite the high prices -- not to mention shipping costs -- crab cakes are really a down-home food, traditionally used as a way to stretch crab meat to the max.)

The last two versions -- from Chesapeake Bay Crab Cakes & More (\$79 for eight 6-ounce cakes) and Phillips, an East Coast seafood restaurant chain (\$60 for six 4-ounce cakes) -- won the most approval. Both were heavy on the lump and looked properly "not unified," as Kristi said. However, the cakes from Philips were nearly "all crab," said Leslie, and had a buttery, sweet taste that captured the essence of the crustacean. True, they almost fell apart on the plate, but our testers considered that an advantage. "If it looks like someone's grandma came and slapped it together, that's a crab cake," said Leslie. It's our Best Overall.

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STORE/PRICE/PHONE	QUALITY	SHIPPING COST/TIME	RETURN POLICY	PHONE/WEB EXPERIENCE	COMMENT
The Crab Place Lump Crab Cakes; \$69.95 877-328-2722 crabplace.com	A decent cake, with good flavor and a noticeable amount of crab. But our testers thought there could have been more lump in the mix. Includes six 6-ounce cakes.	Overnight shipping, for \$34.95, came without a hitch.	Company says it aims to please. If customer is unhappy, they can request refund or replacement.	Ordering was hassle-free, with shipping information clearly stated on site.	Company spokesman says the cake has "more lump than backfin," and notes that Crab Place uses only Maryland crab meat. Company also ships whole crabs.
Phillips Premium Crab Cakes \$59.95	Best Overall. Almost all crab, with plenty of	We paid \$29.90 for on-time overnight	Company says: "In the unlikely	The site, which carries a wide variety of foods, doesn't say what is in the cakes' "blend of	Want more crab cakes? Phillips sells a dozen for \$99.95 -- a slight savings.

<p>800-782-2722 crabcakes.com</p>	<p>lump in the mix. The cakes almost fell apart, but testers said that made them all the more authentic. Includes six 4-ounce cakes.</p>	<p>shipping.</p>	<p>event that you are not satisfied with your purchase, please call ... for a replacement or refund."</p>	<p>seasonings." It does reveal that Ritz crackers are used to hold everything together.</p>	<p>Company says it uses some crab meat from Asia.</p>
<p>Chesapeake Bay Crab Cakes & More Colossal Crab Cakes; \$79 800-432-2722 cbcrabcakes.com</p>	<p>Second only to Phillips. Cakes had nearly as much meat and nearly as non-unified a look. But the taste and texture was just a tad less "homey," testers said. Eight 6-ounce cakes.</p>	<p>Next-day shipping, for \$33.95, arrived on time.</p>	<p>Company says it stands "behind the quality of our products." Dissatisfied customers can request a refund or replacement.</p>	<p>We had to create an account to complete our order -- a step we prefer avoiding.</p>	<p>Company sells its crab cakes in a variety of styles and sizes, including traditional, "baby cakes" and a low-fat "American Heart Association Crab Cake." Also carries other gourmet treats.</p>
<p>Cadillac Crab Cake Co. Cadillac Crab Cake; \$59 877-203-5679 cadillaccrabcake.com</p>	<p>A unique twist -- you shape the cakes to suit your taste. Testers generally gave the texture and flavor a thumbs-up, too. One 36-ounce portion.</p>	<p>We paid \$33.89 for on-time overnight shipping.</p>	<p>No policy indicated on site, but company says "it stands by product 100 percent." Call for replacement or refund.</p>	<p>There's a \$7 handling fee per order, which we didn't discover until late in the ordering process. We wished the site had made that clearer.</p>	<p>If you want more than 36 ounces, the company says that "larger portions can be arranged."</p>
<p>Omaha Steaks Champagne Crab Cakes \$59.99 800-960-8400</p>	<p>The sorriest batch in the bunch: More cake than crab, with little</p>	<p>Overnight shipping is \$38.99, and our order arrived on</p>	<p>Company says, "If you are not absolutely</p>	<p>We thought it a little weird when the site offered to sell us pet treats with our crab cakes. Company says it uses crab from Louisiana.</p>	<p>While we didn't care much for the offering, a company spokeswoman says it's a very popular</p>

<p>omahasteaks.com</p>	<p>seafood flavor. Panel couldn't taste the promised "touch of champagne." Eight 3-ounce cakes.</p>	<p>time.</p>	<p>thrilled with your purchase from us for any reason at all," it will offer a refund or replacement.</p>		<p>item. "We've carried it for years and years," she says.</p>
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