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Online orders take pinch off crab sellers

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Enlarge By Jennifer Corbett, GNS

"Captain" Bob Wisowaty of Delaware, a crabber since age 12, plans to start an online-order operation in the spring.

By Eric Ruth, The (Wilmington, Del.) News Journal

These days, Delaware crabbers and crab merchants are serving delicious local blue-claw crabs three ways — steamed, stuffed or shipped.

Crab addicts and expatriate East Coasters from around the nation are fueling a growing market for mail-order crustaceans, boosting the fortunes of one Delaware restaurant and inspiring dreams of Internet entrepreneurship elsewhere in the state.

Whether they're sent cooked, live or patted into cakes, the jet-set crabs are adding to the region's seafood reputation and broadening the reach of a methodical eating ritual that once was a local phenomenon.

"I've been addicted to them," said 45-year-old Margaret Kiefer, a New Yorker whose Brooklyn roots are betrayed by her accent and whose newfound love for Delaware crab has resulted in a 24-cake-a-month habit.

Her supplier is only too willing to mail the next fix north — or south, or anywhere else in the nation.

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ORDER CRABS HERE

- A few of the Mid-Atlantic companies that ship crabs, with links to their websites:
- [Crab Cake Express](#), Fenwick Island, Del. 888-539-6559.
 - [TarBay Seafood](#), Fishing Creek, Md. 866-952-7227.
 - [The Crab Place](#), Crisfield, Md. 877-328-2722.
 - [Harbor House Crabs](#), Harrisburg, Pa. 888-458-8272.
 - [Linton's Seafood](#), Crisfield, Md. 877-546-8667.

"We've shipped to Fairbanks, Alaska. We've shipped to Hawaii," said Scott Fornwalt, co-owner of the Fenwick Crab House in Fenwick Island, Del., which takes in up to 20% of its sales through its website, [CrabCakeExpress.com](#).

But crabs, and more significantly crab cracking, also inspire an almost spiritual adoration that for some can only be satisfied with a pile of whole, steamed and seriously spicy crustaceans.

Not many know the depths of that love better than "Captain" Bob Wisowaty, former owner of Wiso's Crab House (now Kathy's) in Delaware City, Del.

A crabber and crab merchant since age 12, the 55-year-old aims to launch a mail-order website in spring to supplement the carryout business he runs.

Wisowaty and crew already contend with chaotic business during crab season and must still figure out the intricacies of Web design, payment procedures, shipping and the thousands of other details of mailing perishable food thousands of miles in just one day.

Greg Cain knows those aggravations well. He's run [CrabPlace.com](#) out of Crisfield, Md., for 10 years, building it into a \$2 million-a-year business that's growing 25% to 30% annually.

Success means constantly monitoring where the crabs are running and continually staying abreast of computer and billing issues, said Cain, whose 10-person staff includes a full-time computer technician and graphic designer.

Some seasons — such as this year — the wily crabs can be plentiful but not inclined to take the bait, Wisowaty said.

Katie Doll, Web administrator for [TarBaySeafood.com](#), a crab shipper in Fishing Creek, Md., that launched its site last summer, says many customers either lived in the Mid-Atlantic states at one time or vacationed there: "They just can't give that taste of crabs up."

While the crabbing season will begin to fade in the Mid-Atlantic in a few weeks, the local crab merchants will work to keep customers fed through the winter, shifting farther south for supplies. Eventually, business owners such as Fornwalt will tap Mexican suppliers and could turn to Venezuela for blue-claw crabmeat.

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In fact, winter is the most hectic time of year for many businesses. Most of the year, a staff of four at Fenwick Crab House produces each of the 100,000 or so crab cakes that will be shipped. Around the holidays, staffing jumps to 10 or 12, and on the day before Christmas, they will likely make, pack and ship 5,000 cakes in five hours.

The price of long-distance gluttony can be dear. Crab shippers' rates for a dozen crabs range from \$37 to \$57 (5½- to 6-inch size). Shipping adds an additional \$20 to \$95 per dozen.

At the Fenwick Crab House, cakes run a little more than \$10 apiece shipped.

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Posted 10/9/2007 9:35 PM

Updated 10/10/2007 9:30 AM

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Koty wrote: 10/10/2007 7:39:35 AM

You use to be able to go to the Philadelphia Italian market on a Saturday morning and buy a bushel of blue crabs for \$12. I guess the times have changed.

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Dr-Wayne wrote: 10/10/2007 7:49:32 AM

Yes you could buy a bushel for \$12.....i think Columbus was delivering them on the Pina. You have to be really old to remember crabs at \$12 a bushel.

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King Kennedy wrote: 10/10/2007 8:16:17 AM

Lobsters are still overpriced.

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truckman wrote: 10/10/2007 9:08:12 AM

How long until they are depleted?

After watching some Thai vilagers cook up large spiders and crack open the legs did it really hit me how close crabs are to spiders. The meat look identical, after all they are in the spider family. Never ate one again.

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prerunner wrote: 10/10/2007 9:46:15 AM

truckman,

Yet you have no trouble eating the muscle tissue of a cow, pig or chicken?

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rapidtroncis wrote: 10/10/2007 11:12:54 AM

Crab is available in most of the country nowadays, but not all kinds of crab. I live in wyoming and about the only type of crab you will see here is snow crab.

Corey
www.myblurps.com

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truckman wrote: 10/10/2007 11:37:05 AM

prerunner-I have no problem shooting, gutting, processing and cooking animals not insects.

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MDS425 wrote: 10/10/2007 12:00:20 PM

Here along the coast in SC you can get crabs for as little as \$17 a half/bushel, \$35 a bushel or \$7 a dozen. I love them and sometimes buy them 3 or 4 times a month.

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o050441 wrote: 10/10/2007 12:35:25 PM

I got crabs.

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