



The Judicial Palate

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Spring – Time for Soft Shells

Spring marks the beginning of soft shell crab season, which runs from April through September. A soft shell crab is not a species of crab, but a crab that has molted its exoskeleton. As a result, the entire crab, including the shell, is edible. In our area, soft shell crabs are typically the celebrated blue crabs from the Chesapeake or the Atlantic.

Perhaps you have seen soft shells on a restaurant menu—usually served in a sandwich with lettuce, tomato and tartar sauce—but have never worked up the nerve to order them. If that is the case, you do not know what you are missing. These crustaceans can be very plump, flavorful, and juicy if you prepare them correctly. And, if you work up the courage to eat a soft shell, why hide it in between two pieces of bread?

This recipe for a Sauté of Soft Shell, Shrimp, and Scallops features the soft shell crab, pure and simple, and is an ideal light springtime dinner. The quantities are intended for four, but can be modified accordingly.

Ingredients:

- 4 soft shell crabs
- 8 sea scallops (dry pack preferred)
- 12 jumbo shrimp, shelled and deveined
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Unsalted butter
- Finishing salt
- Fresh ground pepper
- Freshly squeezed lemon juice
- Fresh herbs
- Whole milk
- 10 juniper berries

When you purchase soft shell crabs, ask the fishmonger to clean them so that

they will be ready to cook. Marinate the crabs in a milk bath with the juniper berries (squeeze the berries before you put them in the milk to release their flavor), which you can find in a spice market or gourmet food market. This marinade is the key to a juicy soft shell. Refrigerate the marinating crabs for about two hours. Remove the crabs from the marinade, heat two large nonstick pans over medium heat and add two tablespoons of olive oil and two tablespoons of butter to each pan. Allow the butter to foam, and tilt the pans around so that the olive oil and butter coat the bottoms. Place the soft shells in one pan and cook for about four minutes until golden brown. Turn and cook for another four minutes until golden brown.

While you are sautéing the soft shells, place the shrimp and scallops in the other pan. They cook quickly and only need two or three minutes per side. When finished, the scallops should be golden brown on the edges and the shrimp will be white and no longer translucent.

Immediately plate each soft shell with 3 shrimp and two scallops. Drizzle with freshly squeezed lemon juice (Meyer lemons preferred) and sprinkle with finishing salt and pepper to taste. Also, add fresh herbs, such as lemon verbena, for both flavor and garnish.

Serve the seafood sauté with some green spring vegetables, such as ramps or fiddlehead ferns. A ramp is a wild onion that has a bulb similar to that of a scallion, but is much more colorful. The lower part of the ramp stem has a pinkish-purple hue that expands into wide green leaves.

Ramps are freshly picked before selling at markets, so be sure to wash them thoroughly to remove any dirt. Cut off the very

bottom of the bulb and leave the ramp intact for cooking. Sauté the ramps in olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Cook them until they soften, about 8 to 10 minutes. Serve alongside the soft shells for some oniony flavor and vibrant color.

Fiddlehead ferns are spring vegetables that you have likely seen as accents in flower arrangements. They are the rolled fronds of a young fern cut before they uncurl—a real conversation piece. Wash the ferns thoroughly and steam or boil for about 12 to 15 minutes until they become tender, but not mushy. Then, sauté the fiddleheads in butter and olive oil for a few minutes and season with salt and pepper. Fiddleheads do not have much flavor, but have a nice crunch and make for an interesting and colorful side dish.

To conclude this springtime meal, make a salad of avocado and Belgian endive, both available through the spring. Simply alternate slices of avocado with endive leaves in a circular pattern on a serving plate and top with balsamic vinegar, extra virgin olive oil, finishing salt and fresh ground pepper. Also, place some fresh berries, such as raspberries or blueberries, in the pieces of endive to finish off this colorful and tasty spring salad.

For a light, spring beverage pairing, try Alice Prosecco. This crisp and dry prosecco is produced by a female owned winery and tastes of pear and acacia flowers. You can find Alice at Frank's Wine on Union Street in Wilmington. This sparkling treat will pair well with the sautéed seafood and will add a celebratory note to this springtime meal.

So, turn over a new leaf this spring and enjoy this soft shell crab dish with some ramps or fiddlehead ferns. ☺