

Coming out of their shells

Of the abundance of sumptuous seafood that's landed on north Norfolk's shores, one catch is prized above all others. Nick Hammond falls hook, line and sinker for Cromer crab

THE road stops and the sky starts. I've driven for more than three hours across the east of England and now, as I crawl to a halt on a single-track road, I can't go any further unless I get into a submarine. Ahead lies a vast sandy track, an iron sky and the sea; I have arrived at the Norfolk coast.

A little to my right is Cookie's Crab Shop in Salthouse, near the Georgian market town of Holt. It has an unprepossessing wooden shop-front, but several cars are already parked outside even though it's not yet noon. They're here because, every day, hundreds of portions of ridiculously fresh seafood are served with a smile. I settle down in the shop's little extension restaurant and order the Royal Crab Salad: a steal at £6.95, including cockles, prawns, smoked mackerel and a whole dressed Cromer crab.

'They're smaller than the crabs you buy elsewhere and hen crabs offer the most meat,' explains Peter McKnespiey, who runs Cookie's with his wife, Suzanne. 'When they're big enough for eating—at about five

years old—the shell at the back lifts as if it's fit to burst. There's more brown meat on our crabs than on other crabs, too. And it's the brown meat that's the tastiest.'

My crab is incredibly delicate, with a faint, ozone sweetness—it's a light and perfectly nuanced lunch. 'Suzanne's mum and dad opened this shop in 1956,' continues Mr McKnespiey in his gentle Norfolk brogue, as we take in the brisk sea air and stroll across the sandy approach to the shingle beach. 'There's never been a shortage of crab or lobster in all that time. There's more than enough of them down there, milling about.' He waves his arm seaward: 'And it's all because of that reef.'

That reef is Norfolk's great stretch of offshore chalk, called The Marle by local crabbers. It's this natural feature that provides the perfect hideaway for the crustacean *Cancer pagurus*—the brown crab. 'It's the same species of crab you buy in Cornwall,' says Martin Newlands, who's been catching them for decades and sells fresh crab each day from his Gangway Crab Shop in Cromer. 'But ours grow more slowly and are

'Light, subtle and fresh beyond compare': it's mostly women who pick the meat from the crab shells as 'they're more dexterous'

sweeter than those from elsewhere. That's thanks to The Marle. It's good for all marine life. It keeps the water clean and gives lobsters and crabs plenty of places to hide away.'

Being careful not to overfish is paramount. 'We only use day boats off the beach,' explains Mr Newlands. 'And if the wind's blowing a hoolie, well, we don't go out.' Most crabs fished from the pots are returned, alive, to the depths—they have to measure 4½in or more across to be big enough to eat. It's an old system that works—The Marle prevents big fishing boats from getting access to the crabs, which leaves many to grow to a decent size.

Back in 2012, Cromer's crab industry was in crisis: when the town factory, owned by Young's Seafood, closed down, with the loss of more than 200 jobs, it was a devastating blow. But it wasn't the end of the story. Local fisherman Kevin Jonas saw



an opportunity in adversity and he's expanded his small fishing business to become Cromer's leading supplier of crab and lobster.

'We're here to promote what a fantastic, natural, sustainable product Cromer crab is,' he enthuses from his office in the state-of-the-art Jonas Seafood factory on the outskirts of town. 'The crabs are still out there in good numbers and they're still fantastic quality. The fishermen still know how to catch them. It's down to us now to process them properly and get them to shelves all over the country.'

During the March to October season, crabs are killed, cooked, picked and dressed at Jonas Seafood within 24 hours of leaving the sea. A team of more than 50 workers runs a round-the-clock operation. 'There's a lot of red tape to go through these days—we have a list as long as your arm of what we can and can't do with the crabs when they get here,' sighs Mr Jonas. 'But we're employing the town's crab people again. And there's still a demand.'

We walk the chilly, ultra-clean factory floor and Mr Jonas shows me the series of separate insulated rooms that house each stage of the process, taking me into one room where great crates of early-season crab are being unloaded. 'The water's still pretty cold,' notes Mr Jonas, as we pass a saltwater tank in which

Crabs are caught from March to October and must measure 4½in across to be large enough to eat—the rest are returned, alive, to the water

‘The crab meat is somehow redolent of the sea, the skyscape and this irresistible little town’

lobsters joust sluggishly. 'Most of them are still tucked up somewhere waiting for the water temperature to nudge up a bit.'

Once local crabbers bring in their catch, the crabs are humanely killed by electric current, cooked for about 20 minutes and then fast-chilled down ready for the picking room. In the past, teams of lady pickers were regarded as the leading experts of the painstaking art of separating the available meat from the shell while avoiding injury in the process—and nothing's changed. There are men in the picking room, but they're outnumbered by women. 'They're more dexterous,' concedes Mr Jonas. 'It's a highly skilled job and it's possible to earn good money when you're an experienced picker.'

Pop music drifts through the room and the pickers—dressed in space suits and wellies—laugh and chat with one another across the stainless-steel worktops. Their hands shuttle across sharp shells in a blur, as they deposit

meat in one container and empty shells in another. Even the shells get put to good use—the crab carapace is steam-cleaned and used to house the freshly-dressed meat and any leftover shell is taken away and ground down for later use as fertiliser.

But Cromer isn't just about crabs. The firm flesh of Norfolk lobster is prized by chefs and epicureans alike and oysters and mussels from Brancaster, a little further north up the coast, are delicious. There's a considerable whelk fishery here, too, with most of those caught off the Norfolk coast ending up in Korea, where they're a sought-after delicacy.

Each year, the town's bond with seafood is celebrated through the Crab and Lobster Festival. From May 15 to 17 this year, live music, market stalls, chef demonstrations and street theatre will all raise money for local charities—and the local economy—in both Cromer and the nearby town of Sheringham.

There's just time for one more crab dish before I begin my long trip home. This time, it's a simply cooked crab, some melted butter, a set of crackers and a pot of mayonnaise. I eat it a stone's throw from the seashore on a blustery late-March morning, as an oystercatcher perambulates along the shoreline. The meat tastes reassuringly right, once more—light and subtle and fresh beyond compare. It's somehow redolent of the sea, the skyscape and this irresistible little town. Make the journey to Cromer—the crabs will be waiting.



Where to feast on crab

Cookie's Crab Shop, The Green, Salthouse, Holt, Norfolk NR25 7AJ (01263 740352; www.salthouse.org.uk)

Gangway Crab Shop, The Gangway, Cromer, Norfolk NR27 9ET (01263 515744)

Jonas Seafood, Stone Hill Way, Cromer, Norfolk NR27 9JW (01263 515844; www.jonasseafood.com)