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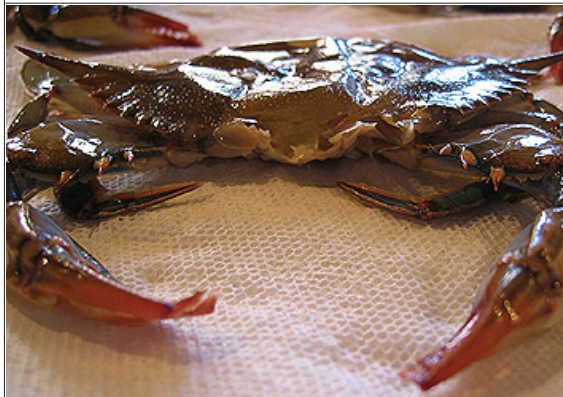
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DIRK'S FISH & GOURMET SHOP
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Crabbin' in Chicago

By Michael Nagrant



YOU'D THINK THE REVERED CONCUBINE OF THE
SCIENTOLOGY MOVEMENT COULD AFFORD A HIGH-LEVEL
FOOD CONSIGLIERE, someone to tell her where the truly

best eats are. Instead, it turns out Mrs. Tom Cruise, nee Katie Holmes, probably listens to what some second-rate concierge at a high-priced Michigan Avenue hotel told her last time she was in Chicago. You see, according to last week's People magazine, Holmes recently brought in frozen Gino's East deep-dish pizza for the crew of her current film "Mad Money."

You could do worse. She could've brought in Giordano's. And, truth be told, I'm kind of enamored with Gino's sausage patty (It's as if the cabbies that opened Gino's back in the day lost a poker bet to Bob Evans.) But, and I know this is a matter of taste, I believe if her folks had really done their homework, they would have imported Pizano's (61 East Madison) or Pequod's (2207 North Clybourn).

Either way, Holmes importation gesture reminded me of something I've been pondering a lot lately: Can you have a great regional delicacy outside of its region of origin? For example, can you get a good, or even better, Philly cheesesteak outside of Philly?

I know I'm whizzing in a tornado on this one. The smart folks will point out that despite the nutmeg-spiced Italian beef and superior giardinara, the taste of an Al's sandwich is just as important as the fact that you're knee-deep in gravy-soaked bread, standing on bare concrete, bellied up to waist-high stainless-steel counters and scanning the celebrity headshots and signed dollar bills at the store on Taylor Street. There's a history and culture you won't find at a beef stand in L.A.

Another practical reason you won't find great examples of iconic foods outside their locale of origin is science. As the wisdom goes, the iconic bagels at H and H in New York begin at the local water supply.

And so, every May, when the sign goes up at Dirk's Fish & Gourmet Shop (2070 North Clybourn) announcing the arrival of the first soft-shell crabs of the season, it's a great moment of conflict for me. On one hand it's a triumphant annual local tradition signaling the arrival of early summer. As I stand next to the glistening refrigerated case, Dirk's prime-sized, freshly molted blue crabs straight from the Chesapeake clatter upon one another, occasionally frothing at the mouth in their icy nest. Next to the amiable wise-cracking Dirk, they're the liveliest thing in the joint.

Softshells should be eaten within four days of molting, otherwise they begin to rebuild their shells. These crunchier crabs, often referred to as "papershells," are what I first had in a second-rate Michigan restaurant. While it ruined my interest in softshells for years, Dirk's fresh ones renewed my faith. Also, it's not too often that you get asked if "you want to kill and clean" your dinner yourself. (Dirk's will remove the gills and guts, and all you have to do is cook 'em).

Regarding the conflict I feel, I know the first thing I'm going to do once I procure the crabs is make a po' boy, which is an iconic regional delicacy of New Orleans, and therefore my attempt is bound to be an imitation. Regarding points already outlined, I've got a lot going against me.

Science wise, po' boy bread is much denser and chewier than your Jewel French baguette, a fact generally attributed to the high ambient Louisiana humidity which is thought to cause a more active yeast at legendary New Orleans bakers such as Liedenheimers or Gendusa's. I've solved this problem. Local baker Red Hen's (1623 North Milwaukee) baguette has just the right density and flakiness.

On the historic side, I've got to face up to almost eighty years of invention and refinement. The po-boy was invented by Clovis and Benjamin Martin, brothers and former streetcar drivers who opened a restaurant on St. Claude Avenue in the 1920s. When streetcar drivers went on strike in 1929, the brothers created an inexpensive sandwich consisting of gravy and bits of roast beef (later known as "debris") on French bread that they would serve the unemployed workers. When a worker came by for one, a cry would go up in the kitchen that "here comes another poor boy!"

While it's true, my kitchen doesn't quite have the ambience of legendary N'awlins po-boy shacks like Johnny's, Mother's, Casamento's, Uglesich's or Galley, I like to believe that after three years of making these sandwiches (see recipe at Newcity.com), I can hold my own. On the other hand, I'm probably just as deluded as Katie Holmes.

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