

Chef's Corner: Crab Imperial-Stuffed Mini-Fillets

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Broiled Crab Imperial-Stuffed Fillets is hands-down my favorite seafood recipe, and it will transform even the most ordinary fillet into a culinary masterpiece!

The Crab Imperial Stuffing is the featured item in this month's edition of the Chef's Corner.

This was a signature recipe for our family seafood restaurant in southern Virginia Beach for over 25 years. It is simple to make, very versatile, and unbelievably delicious!

Even with the high price of crabmeat these days, this is a MUST-try for all – you will not be disappointed!



Broiled Fillets of Flounder, Sea Mullet, and Bluefish Stuffed with Backfin/Lump Crab Imperial!

On this particular day in May of 2018, I managed to pull a 19-inch “keeper” Flounder out of the Salvo surf along with three large Sea Mullet (Kingfish) and a 13-inch Bluefish. Each of these fine fish were of a size worthy to fillet and stuff, so I proceeded to fillet each and take them directly to the kitchen!

As federal and state regulations continue to squeeze size and creel limits for recreational anglers, recipes like this will become even more typical as we look for means by which to prepare a literal smorgasbord of tasty species caught on any given day in the Cape Hatteras surf! I think you'll find this month's feature does just that, so enjoy!

Ingredients:

8-10 fresh fish fillets of relatively similar thickness (see below)

Crab Imperial (scale ingredients up or down in ½-lb increments)

- 2 pounds lump or backfin crabmeat (Blue Crab)
- 4 eggs (2 per pound)
- Extra heavy mayonnaise
- Parsley flakes, dried (fresh chopped parsley is even better!)
- Worcestershire Sauce (I like Lee & Perrins)
- Tabasco Sauce
- Old Bay Seasoning (optional)



Ready to Mix-up the Imperial!

Fish Spice:* Sea Salt, black pepper, granulated garlic, and oregano (apply to fish flesh, only)

Melted butter for basting fillets

Fresh lemon halves for deglazing the pan

Dry Sherry Wine (optional) – also for deglazing the pan and add richness to the lemon butter sauce

Garnish: Parsley sprigs and fresh lemon wedges

***NOTE:** For the Fish Spice, it's really up to the chef. Old Bay, Cajun Shake, Lemon Pepper, or other personal favorite work just fine – I am only providing my favorite blend because it goes so well with the butter and lemon.

Directions:

Mixing the Crab Imperial

Gently break-up the fresh crabmeat and place into a large mixing bowl.

Add the mayonnaise and eggs to the bowl atop the crabmeat.

Add parsley flakes, Tabasco, Worcestershire, and Old Bay (optional) to the bowl.

Gently fold-in all ingredients until everything is evenly distributed.

The texture should be smooth, and the crabmeat should have retained its shape quite nicely if it was fresh!

If the mixture is a bit runny or not smooth enough, add a little more mayo.

Place it refrigerator to chill and set for an hour or so.



Ready to Fold-in all Ingredients for a Creamy Imperial!



Creamy Crab Imperial Ready to "Set" in the Fridge!

NOTE: Some markets will put pasteurized crabmeat in plastic containers labeled “fresh crabmeat.” When this happens, there is often a trace amount of liquid in the container and the crabmeat has a wetter texture. It will also break down easier during mixing. In these cases, I like to dice one or two pieces of white bread into tiny cubes to absorb the excess moisture and bind the ingredients. This is only necessary if the Imperial is a bit runny, which is rare.

Stuffing the Mini-Filletts

Remove any pin-bones from the fillets

Run finger down the centerline of each fillet and cut a slit in each side to create a longitudinal pouch on either side of the centerline in which to tuck the stuffing. Be careful not to cut straight down and through – the cut should create a nice long pouch from top to bottom in which the stuffing is placed. I like skin-on fillets to retain the oils and hold the fillets together, but skinless is fine.

Brush some melted butter on a sheet pan suitable for broiling. Olive oil or olive oil spray works well, too!

Arrange each fillet on the broiling pan and stuff each pouch with Crab Imperial as shown.



Mixed-Bag of Fresh Fillets from the Surf in Salvo, NC



Stuffed Fillets of Flounder, Sea Mullet, and Bluefish!

Baste each stuffed fillet with oil and broil on the high rack on high until the Imperial begins to brown.

Remove from the broiler, baste each fillet, and season the fish with your choice of seasonings.

Lightly dust the entire fillet with paprika and return to the oven on a lower rack and either bake or “broast” until the Imperial is just firm to the touch.

Broasting is a technique I use to save time and finish-off a broiled dish in a conventional oven.

To broast, simply leave the broiler on high and move the pan to the lowest shelf in the oven.

When done, remove from oven, kill the sizzle with a dash of dry sherry, and squeeze fresh lemon juice around the fish to deglaze the pan and create a wonderful sauce. This saves time switching between “broil” and “bake” and/or using a second oven.

I like using a little dry sherry as I deglaze the pan, but it is entirely optional.

Drizzle the lemon-butter sauce from the pan over the fillets and serve!

NOTE: I cooked this batch of stuffed fillets in a single pan, but they can be broiled on individual broiling platters if desired, and they make amazing leftovers that can be eaten cold or gently reheated for a next-day lunch!



Once browned under the broiler, place on a lower rack and Broast to firm-up the Imperial, but do not overcook!

I think all of us that fish the OBX surf have days where we catch a little bit of everything – from Spanish Mackerel and Bluefish to Puppy Drum, Sea Mullet, and Pompano.

I used to love catching a limit of 12- to 15-inch Bluefish because they produced the perfect size fillets for stuffing and were always reliable and eager to bite – be it on fresh cut bait or whatever metal lure I was able to cast into the horizon.

But times are changing, and non-scientific size and creel limits are being introduced by legislators and politicians with questionable rationale and/or logic. For example, the newly established 3-fish daily possession limit for recreational Bluefish anglers is both arbitrary and without any apparent scientific rationale. Nonetheless, it is the new reality.

On the bright side, I think this may be a blessing if we consider the bigger picture and focus on angler development.

Anglers are now, more than ever, encouraged to broaden their horizons and learn how to catch multiple species vice specializing in one or two. This will lead to discovery, learning, and a greater appreciation of many underappreciated species such as Dog Sharks, Skates, and Stingrays – all of which are excellent table fare.

With that in mind, I will continue to expand the boundaries of culinary exploration in upcoming editions of The Chef's Corner and hope you dare to explore new and exciting ways to ethically utilize every inch and every ounce of fish and game harvested well into the future – whatever that may bring!

Contributed by CHAC Angler John Germanos, AKA “The Instinctive Chef.”

