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Blue crabs inhabit the coastal waters of the western Atlantic, including the Chesapeake Bay and the Gulf of Mexico.

FLORIDA EATS

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL

Over the decades, we've had the privilege of experiencing life in many regions of the U.S., from Massachusetts to Hawaii. This time of the year when the weather is dreary, I love to take a nostalgic trip — via my taste buds — to warmer regions of the country as a reminder that winter doesn't last forever. Our wanderings included a brief year in Florida and since then, we return regularly to the Sunshine State. This is a roundup of some of our favorite locales and Florida foods.

ST. PETERSBURG DREAMS

We're sitting in a coffee shop tucked into a little nook just off St. Pete Beach. Across from us is a row of tiny beach houses. They are unadorned, but well kept, and painted in an array of pastel colors. I like them despite their nearly impractical size. Between the coffee shop and the little rowhouses is a narrow, paved walkway that leads right down to the beach. As I sit at the window spying on the beach houses, a sun-browned young man rides up on a bike and parks it near one of the houses. A woman walks out of another one with a little dog following close behind. I sip my iced coffee and imagine what it would be like to live here, steps from the beach.

After our coffee break, Hubby Chuck and I head down the walkway toward the water. It's off season but neither too hot nor too cold, and the beach is sparsely populated today. Even the breeze seems cooperative. We walk a good distance down the beach until we reach a spot bordering a small inlet. Further inland, the inlet becomes a salt marsh, but here at the ocean's edge it's a home to shellfish and smaller sea creatures.

As we stand along the shoreline a pair of triangular fins breach the water. Immediately we recognize the shape: porpoises. As we watch, the pair move in tandem toward the inlet to our left. The tide is in, so the water there is deep enough for the porpoises to do some hunting. I watch them swimming between clumps of tall grass and think how odd it must be to have to time one's dinner to match the tide.

As for us, our favorite dining spot in St. Pete is undoubtedly Crabby Bills. It's admittedly a bit touristy, but the conch fritters will send your taste buds all the way to Key West.



Laura Hunt Angel

Hearty crab pie is a satisfying coastal favorite.

TAMPA ADVENTURE

It's evening and we head across the causeway to Tampa. We're on our way to the Columbia restaurant in historic Ybor City to sample some authentic Cuban dishes. While waiting on our meals, we're entertained by a raucous troupe of flamenco dancers.

After the music and dancing I glance through a newspaper-style leaflet that explains the restaurant's history. Casimiro Hernandez first opened the doors of the Columbia in 1905, offering Cuban coffee and sandwiches to the area's cigar factory workers. The business was so successful that it expanded to several locations across Florida. It continues to be owned and operated by the Hernandez family.

While dining, we find ourselves caught up in bit of a crime scene. Between bites of ropa vieja and roast pork we learn that police have quietly surrounded the restaurant and locked it down. Fellow diners hardly notice the police officers carefully walking through the dining hall and restrooms. In short order, the officers collar their suspect, a woman. She is quickly handcuffed and led outside to a waiting police car. The incident is over before our key lime pie arrives. Even so, I am thankful to have hubby's

hand to hold as we make our way to our parking spot.

A JAUNT TO THE ATLANTIC COAST

We're in St. Augustine for a week. Our hotel is not far from Old Town, one of the city's premiere shopping districts and a wonderful place to sample a bit of history. It takes little effort to cut through the modern-day trappings and catch a glimpse of colonial St. Augustine. I follow my nose and discover a quaint café serving a conquistadorian style lunch of Spanish picadillo and fried plantains.

My appetite temporarily satisfied, I mosey my way along the cobblestones to tour the shops. After picking out several gifts I nab a few treasures for myself. Before long I'm in the mood for a sweet bite so I head down the lane for pistachio gelato. I'm certain that it's not something the conquistadors ever sampled, but I forego historic accuracy when faced with gelato.

Later that day I am joined by hubby Chuck, and we make our way to the Castillo de San Marcos, the old fort that stands along the shores of the Atlantic. We learn about coquina, the seashell and coral combination that makes up the structure of the fort and has allowed it to stand strong for over 300 years.

My favorite restaurant in

all of Florida is a place that we discovered by accident called Fiddler's Green. For me, no trip to St. Augustine is complete without a plate of Florida lobster tails, lightly seasoned with garlic and eaten in full view of the Atlantic.

NORTH FLORIDA CREEPY CRAWLIES

In addition to the places we've visited, we briefly lived across the street from Itchetucknee Springs, not far Lake City. When we first arrived I was nervous about snakes, but thankfully never saw even one. Banana spiders, on the other hand, were a different story. We soon discovered that pretty much all of the spiders in north Florida had taken up residence in our yard. Their large webs stretched from one dogwood to another, and to do any walking mowing we had to duck to avoid them. Accidental encounters resulted in being completely covered with webbing.

In the evenings, bats regularly came out en masse to scoop up insects, something that oddly enough did not disturb me at all. It was also common to hear armadillos rustling through the shrubbery or to encounter them along the roadways. I was unaware at the time that armadillos can carry Hansen's disease, also known as leprosy. Still, they're cute, in a Jurassic Park sort of way.

One night I was awakened from a dead sleep by the sound of insane laughter. It echoed back and forth through the trees for several minutes before finally fading away. The next morning I called my father and, as best I could, described the sound to him. It turned out to be mating season for Great Horned Owls.

Early one morning, our son, Aaron, had just stepped out the door to wait on the school bus when, suddenly, we heard an enormous boom. It felt as if something huge had struck the side of the house. Certain that he would discover something horrible had happened, Chuck rushed to the bus stop. Everything was fine. One of the neighbor boys explained that it was just a sonic boom from the space shuttle.

Northern Florida cuisine is a blend of classic southern cooking and bayou-style seafood punctuated by a heavy dose of citrus. Boiled peanuts are available at every turn; other local favorites include gator, barbeque and grouper cheeks. Local fare aside, our favorite dining establishment was a little franchise in Gainesville called Chinees Takee Outee.

THE RECIPES

Create one of these Florida favorites and bring the flavors of sunshine to your own kitchen.

A rare celestial event is approaching our doorsteps

On Monday, Aug. 21, 2017, millions of people in the United States will witness a total solar eclipse. A total solar eclipse is a natural spectacle that occurs when the Moon passes directly between the Earth and the Sun and completely occults the Sun's disk. The upcoming solar eclipse is particularly significant because, for the first time since 1991, a total solar eclipse will be visible from American soil. At that time, the eclipse was visible only from the islands of Hawaii. The most recent total solar eclipse that occurred in mainland America was 38 years ago in the winter of 1979. That particular eclipse was visible from a handful of northern states, including Washington, Idaho and Montana, among others. The 2017 eclipse, however, will be the first one in almost 100 years to sweep the country from coast to coast. Many are appropriately referring to this upcoming eclipse as the "Great American Solar Eclipse" because, with the exception of the open waters of the Pacific and Atlantic, this particular solar eclipse will be visible from no other country! Furthermore, this is particularly interesting for people in this part of the country, because the best place on Earth to view this event would be Hopkinsville.

The first town to witness the event will be Newport, Oregon, where the totality will start around 10:16 a.m. (PDT). In the next few hours, this wondrous spectacle of nature will race southeast across 14 different states toward the Atlantic Ocean. The last city to see the eclipse will be Charleston, South Carolina. The greatest eclipse will happen at a location 36°58.5 N 87°39.3 W in the Bainbridge/Sinking Fork area of Christian County. This is a few miles northwest of Hopkinsville. The center is located on a historical farm named Orchard Dale, where the totality will last for two minutes and 40 seconds, beginning at 1:24:39 p.m. (CDT). Eclipse chasers, including professional and amateur astronomers, from all over the world are expected to flock to Hopkinsville to witness this breathtaking event.

This certainly does not mean, however, that everyone must travel to Hopkinsville. This is because there are several other terrific spots in the surrounding area to view this eclipse. Locations such as Dawson Springs, Kuttawa, Eddyville, Princeton, Cadiz and Providence will see a totality of well over two-and-a-half minutes. In downtown Madisonville, the partial phase is slated to start around 11:56:14 a.m. (CDT) and will reach totality at 1:24:33 p.m. (CDT), lasting for about one minute and 47 seconds. People in

Central City will not be as fortunate since the totality will only last for about 44 seconds. It must also be emphasized that totality will only be visible from a narrow corridor averaging about 66 miles. As a result, this eclipse will not reach its totality in places such as Murray, Lexington and Louisville. Nashville will be the largest city to catch a full glimpse of this eclipse, where the totality is expected to last for almost two minutes.

Ancients regarded eclipses with much fear and trepidation.

They would observe a progressively bigger bite being taken out of the Sun (solar eclipse) or the Moon (lunar eclipse). In reality, though, they are harmless. In fact, in the case of a solar eclipse, it is the same Sun, but with a bit less radiation. An eclipse is currently one of the most easily understandable astronomical phenomena, and astronomers are able to predict future eclipses for hundreds of years. Interestingly, solar eclipses open an unknown and otherwise inaccessible door to the vast mysterious cosmos. For example, the solar eclipse of 1919 provided the necessary tools to verify one of the most striking predictions of Einstein's general theory of relativity. Moreover, had it not been for a total solar eclipse, the extended outer atmosphere of the Sun, otherwise known as the corona, would largely remain a mystery to mankind.

On April 8, 2024, another solar eclipse will sweep across American soil from Texas to Maine. The totality will not be visible from Madisonville on that occasion. People in Paducah and Evansville will, however, be able to catch a glimpse of the totality. For many people, the upcoming eclipse could be their only chance to experience the best few minutes of astronomy. This is something not to be missed at any cost.

In the following series of articles, which are scheduled for publication on the third Sunday of each month leading up to the event, I will discuss the science behind a solar eclipse. I will explain why such events are so rare, how to prepare for observing it and what precautions to take for safety purposes. I will also share information about community events the Madisonville Community College will be organizing to celebrate this natural extravaganza.

Dr. Aseem Talukdar, Ph.D., is an associate professor of physics and astronomy at Madisonville Community College. He can be reached by email at aseem.talukdar@kctcs.edu or on Facebook by searching "Aseem Talukdar."



DR. ASEEM TALUKDAR



Laura Hunt Angel

Topped with pecans and coconut, grapefruit salad will wake up winter-weary taste buds.

FLORIDA

FROM PAGE C1

CRAB PIE

More refined individuals may want to call this one a quiche, but it is more satisfying than any wispy tea time tidbit so I have rechristened it as pie. Most crab quiche recipes call for lump blue crab, but less expensive crab will work fine for this recipe.

1 9" pie crust
8 oz. lump blue crab
2 eggs
1 tablespoon plain flour
½ cup mayonnaise (not salad dressing)
½ cup light cream or whole milk
1 cup shredded gruyere cheese
1 teaspoon Old Bay seasoning
½ teaspoon lemon zest, plus extra for garnish
¼ cup chopped green onion
Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Line a 9-inch pie plate with the pie crust and pre-bake it for about 10 minutes.

Remove the crust from the oven and reduce the temperature to 350 degrees F. Drain the crab well and pick out any bits of shell.

In a large bowl, whisk the eggs, flour, mayonnaise and cream. Blend in the cheese, Old Bay, lemon zest and green onion. Carefully fold in the crab meat. (For best results, do not overmix. Keep the crab somewhat "lumpy.") Pour the mixture into the prepared pie pan and bake for about 50 minutes or until a knife inserted near the center of the pie comes out clean. Let it cool for a few minutes before cutting. Garnish with lemon zest, if you wish. Serves 8.

FLORIDA GRAPEFRUIT SALAD

I was dismayed to discover that my clearly marked "red grapefruit" turned out to be white. Although not as colorful, it did not affect the flavor of this dish. To make up for the lack of color, I used some large flaked and toasted coconut that I had on hand. This dish is a nice brunch buffet item or side dish for a

seafood supper.

3 large red grapefruit
5 tablespoons packed brown sugar
2 tablespoons honey
Juice from one lime (2 tablespoons)
3 tablespoons shredded coconut, plus extra for garnish
½ cup toasted pecan pieces

Preheat your oven broiler and set the rack about 6" from the heat. Spray a sheet pan with high temperature non-stick spray.

Peel the grapefruit, separate the segments and cut each segment in half. Place them in a bowl and toss them with the sugar until each piece is coated. Lay the grapefruit in a single layer on the prepared pan and broil until the grapefruit just begins to caramelize, about 3-4 minutes. (Watch carefully to prevent burning.) Remove the grapefruit from the oven and let them cool for 15 minutes, then put them in a salad bowl. Mix together the honey and lime juice; gently stir into the grapefruit. Top with pecans and coconut and toss until the grapefruit is well coated. Garnish with extra coconut, if desired. Serve room temperature or chilled. About 6 servings.

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