

Million dollar legs

Snow crab legs may not be a usual supper staple, but they're a big boon to a handful of coastal communities. Here's a day in the life of a crab harvest

by Sandra Phinney

photography: Kate Barden and Bruce Cramer

It's 6:30am in Petit-de-Grat, NS, a sleepy village located on the east side of Isle Madame—a small island off the southwest coast of Cape Breton. While some folks are in dreamland or just rousing to greet the day, 80 men and women from various parts of Cape Breton are en route to Petit de Grat Packers to unload and process four boatloads of snow crab. The boats have been out for two days; the catch is good—from 14,000 to 18,000 kilograms per boat.

By 7am all plant workers are in position—and no hands are idle. Five men are hunched over in the hold of a boat, removing crabs and filling large plastic boxes, called totes. One man passes empty totes to the guys in the hold while two others heave totes full of crab onto the wharf, where they are weighed, adjusted to 23 kilograms, placed on forklifts and delivered to the production line inside the plant, about 60 metres away. Once the production line has all it can handle, the remaining totes are iced and refrigerated.

The crab's first stop in the production line is to have a shower: high-pressure jets remove the mud and moss. Next stop is the butcher's block, where the legs are removed, graded for size, placed in 13- to 14-kilogram plastic pans and moved to the cooking station. Here, eight pans enter a chamber and move along in boiling water for 12 to 15 minutes, before coming out the other end.

Hot crab then goes into a couple of chill tanks, then it's

Feeling a little crabby (not!): A worker from Petit de Grat Packers proudly shows off a couple of prime snow crabs, caught just off Isle Madame, NS.



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Fishing boats stand by to unload their catch. It takes about four hours to unload a hold full of crab—roughly 5,000 kilograms an hour.

dunked into the final brine where it’s frozen; it goes off to packaging stations to be boxed for shipment.

Although it takes about four hours to unload a hold full of crab (roughly 5,000 kilograms per hour), the entire procedure from the time the crab leaves the boat to the time the legs are ready to ship takes about an hour. (The crab bodies go to a municipal composting site daily.)

Snow crab is caught in Atlantic Canada and Quebec. While it’s not the only crab species harvested in Canada, it’s the largest crab harvest, and one of the cornerstones of Atlantic Canada’s fishery. The landed value (meaning the value to the fisherman at

the wharf, as opposed to the retail value) of snow crab across Canada in 2010 was \$280,696,000; Atlantic Canada’s share was \$245,284,000—or 87.4 per cent. In comparison, the value of lobster in Atlantic Canada for the same year was \$353,870,000.

Petit de Grat Packers processes about 2.7 million kilograms of snow crab every season. Boats take three to 12 hours travelling 30 to 160 kilometres to the fishing grounds, and are usually gone for two days. The season is from April to late September.

To ensure future crab stock, females are not harvested—they are smaller and have a more round body. Females and small crabs (less than a 9.5 centimetre wide carapace) are returned to the sea. Most crabs brought to shore weigh about a kilogram (two pounds).

A boat with one licence is allowed to set 60 traps, or pots, per trip until its quota is reached. These 90-kilogram pots have a two-metre circular metal rim at the bottom, a 1.5-metre metal rim at the top, are 86 centimetres deep and enclosed with a rope mesh. After they are baited with herring, mackerel or squid, the traps are set at 150 fathoms (275 metres.) The crab climbs up the sloping sides of the pot and drops through a

Fishermen have frequented the waters off Isle Madame and the south coast of Cape Breton for more than three centuries. Opposite: Approximately 2.7 million kilograms (6 million pounds) of snow crab goes through Petit de Grat Packers every season, requiring many hands on deck.





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Isle Madame is the largest island in an archipelago off the southwest coast of Cape Breton; Petit-de-Grat is located on the east side of the island.



cone in the centre. Because the cone is smooth leading into the trap, it’s too slippery for it to get out.

Back at the plant, after the first boat is unloaded (sometimes two boats and two crews are working at the same time), everyone takes a lunch break; then the process starts all over. It’s not uncommon for crews to work 12 hours a day.

Crab plant workers range from teenagers to seniors. Some are seasoned workers who ply their skills only in one plant, while others, like a small group of women, follow “the work” wherever it takes them. Depending on the season, they could be grading potatoes in PEI, or picking apples or cutting fish in Nova Scotia.

Some of the workers at the plant are students, like Brendon Samson. The 22-year-old spent three summers removing crab from the holds of boats. “You could see what you did almost immediately and I felt pretty good about the physical accomplishment of unloading a boat carrying thousands of pounds of crab with my co-workers,” he says.

Ironically, Brendon decided to take a degree in physiotherapy. Working hunched over in small quarters didn’t seem to jibe with the notion of desirable body mechanics and optimum conditions for muscles and joints. But he continues to be in awe of crab plant workers—some of them more than six feet tall—who work in the hold hunched over or on their knees, hour after hour, day after day.

The hardest part of the job? “The smell,” Brendon says. “On hot summer days, the ice could only do so much to mask it, although people say around home that the crab plant may stink but the money doesn’t.”

Many hands make light work: Once inside the plant, the crab is cleaned, butchered, weighed, cooked, frozen and packed for shipment. Some of these workers “follow the work” to other processing plants around the Maritimes, depending on the season. Right: Pass the butter; sweet, steamed crab.

