

Crayfish: as sweet by any other name?

*Which would you prefer, a lobster that's true or a lobster that rocks? What's so special about *Jasus Edwardsii*? Dig your claws into the spiny issues surrounding our uniquely delicious crustacean.*

Raise your hand if you think that New Zealand's rock lobster (or crayfish) tastes better than the northern hemisphere's "true" lobster? Thank-you China you may put your hands down now. China buys around 98% of New Zealand's commercial catch of this seafood for one very good reason - it is simply the best tasting lobster on the planet. Its firm texture and subtle flavour give it an edge, but the one aspect of its taste that is particularly valued is its sweetness.

Firstly let's clear up the name crayfish. Here in New Zealand, *Jasus edwardsii*, the salt-water rock lobster, is called crayfish if it is on a menu, a cray if you are a local, and a bug if you are a diver and lucky enough to have your hands wrapped around one. Our Australian neighbours do the same; it's nice for us to be able to agree on some things occasionally. While the rest of the world reserves the term crayfish for the fresh water varieties of lobster, in this part of the world we appropriately turn that notion upside-down. As for the northern hemisphere's "true" lobster, the one with the big cartoon claws, that species is surprisingly only distantly related to our crayfish (and it doesn't taste as good).

The seafood gathered from the deep blue waters of New Zealand's remote corner of the Pacific Ocean is delicious, but even with such a high bar crayfish is a delectable luxury. The bulk of a crayfish is in its muscular tail, a dense opalescent slab of meat that needs carefully timed cooking to preserve its firm texture. When you bite into a chunk of crayfish tail it should feel compact, like scallop meat, before flooding your mouth with its savoury, briny wash. The taste is mild, with a faintly metallic edge, but this is offset by its sweet flavour that begs the embellishment of a squeeze of sharpness from a lime or a lemon.

If you start mining the seams of flesh beyond the tail, then, as even north-of-the-equator lobster eaters will tell you, the texture becomes smoother, the taste even sweeter. Perhaps it's something to do with the effort of finding and extracting those divine morsels; the picking around the shell, the cracking of the legs. Without the large repository of flesh in the claws this is a particularly intricate task when dealing with a crayfish. In fact in the days before live export some countries used to buy New Zealand crayfish simply as frozen tails. Philistines! Crayfish is a beast that should be appreciated in its entirety, a practice that our Chinese friends respect. It is the combination of a succulent bite, its mild saline flavour along with its lush sweetness that makes this particular species of crustacean from this particular part of the world exceptional.

What generates the remarkable flavour of the New Zealand's crayfish is its habitat. Living in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and at the opposite end of the world to the

major land masses and their associated populations and activities is a good start. Add to that the rocky caves and crevices that crayfish inhabit. This coastal topography is often associated with remote, rugged shorelines, distant from centres of industry and intensive agriculture. Then there is our latitude; the colder the water, the sweeter the taste (it's to do with a lesser amount of salt being drawn up into the flesh). Australian crayfish are almost as good as New Zealand crayfish (a bit like their rugby teams) but as we are the more southerly, cooler isles, ours taste better.

So how should you eat crayfish? Well that's down to personal preference. Chances are that it will taste wonderful no matter what you do with it, however I suggest saving the heavy cream and cheese thermidors for those northern 'true' lobsters and going for a lighter approach with New Zealand crayfish. There's something to be said for simply piling it into a soft brown roll with mayonnaise, lemon juice and white pepper. You could try mixing the freshly cooked meat with equal parts of mayonnaise and Greek yoghurt, adding a squirt of lemon juice and a handful of fresh basil leaves. Stack this in a wrap along with salad leaves for bulk, radish for crunch, and some diced tomato to add a little bit of sharpness to that sweet crayfish meat and to buddy up with the fresh basil. Just make sure that there's enough for at least two wraps per person, no-one will want to stop at one.

And the best place in New Zealand to eat crayfish? The first crayfish that I ate was as a teenager on a road trip around the Coromandel Peninsula on the back of my friend's

motorbike. We stopped along the way where a hand-written sign outside the house of a fisherman advertised crayfish for sale, and we cooked it up in the kitchen of the Whitianga motor-camp. I can remember every mouthful. The south coasts of Wellington and Palliser Bay give up some wonderful Cook Strait crayfish, and I hear that they taste pretty sweet down in the cool waters of Fiordland and Stewart Island so I guess there is no right answer to that question, but there is no doubt about where the most **appropriate** place to eat crayfish is. That's the place where Maori have been gathering them for half a millennium. The place that gets its name by linking the Maori word for food - kai, with the name for crayfish - koura. Kaikoura, where the crayfish is sweet whatever name you call it by.