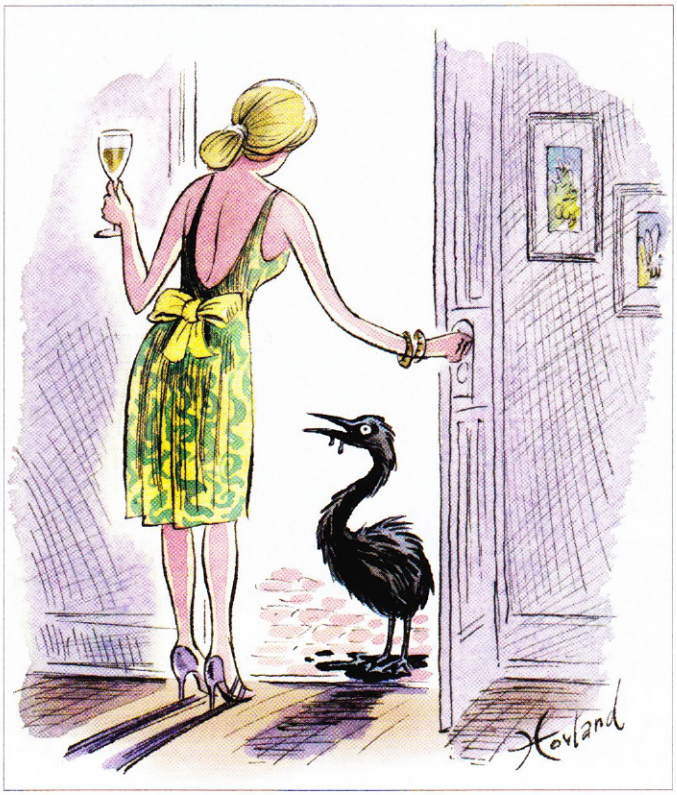

A CULINARY HOMAGE TO THE GULF

BY JOCELYN C. ZUCKERMAN

"ARE YOU SERIOUS?" ASKED the guy behind the counter, a look of doubt crimping his sun-tanned face. It was mid-June, and I had just told him I was interested in buying some seafood from the Gulf of Mexico. By that time, apparently, every other New Yorker had decided not to go anywhere near the stuff. But I was on something of a mission.

A few nights earlier, I'd had dinner with my friend Nathalie, who had just moved back to the city from New Orleans. At the last minute, she had invited along another friend, Robin, who helps Louisiana fishermen and shrimpers get small-business loans. Nathalie writes about cooking, and I used to be an editor at *Gourmet*, so save for the requisite detours to *Treme* and the Saints, our talk mostly centered on food. Nat mentioned that Big Easy chefs had begun substituting chicken livers for oysters and were having Dover sole FedEx-ed down to stand in for the region's speckled trout. Robin told of the town meeting she'd sat in on a few nights earlier: a burly shrimper had stood up to speak, only to break down in front of the crowd.

I'll admit that before the dinner I hadn't focused much on the situation in the Gulf. Of course I knew the April 20 explosion on the Deepwater Horizon had been an unprecedented disaster, one getting worse by the day, but between the reporting I'd been doing on post-earthquake Haiti and my usual day-to-day neuroses, I was already overwhlemed. When I saw photos of oil-dipped pelicans and tar-shellacked turtles, I mostly turned the page. I just didn't have the emotional space to let those images in.

But I went to bed with that shrimper on my mind, and when I woke up he was still there. By the end of the week, I'd become so fixated on the spill and its impact on the people and the food of the region, I could have told you more about berms and top kills than you would ever want to know. I'd learned that, in addition to serving as the breeding ground for a seemingly infinite variety of marine wildlife, the Gulf of Mexico provides 1.3 billion pounds of fish and shellfish each year, including 73 percent of all shrimp and two-thirds of all oysters harvested in the United States. Louisiana alone is responsible for more than a quarter of the nation's blue crabs.

By June 21 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had closed more than a third of federal Gulf waters to fishing, and seafood prices had shot up as much as 50 percent. Restaurateurs, chefs, and wholesalers across the country were struggling to persuade customers that their products were safe. Meanwhile, people who knew no life aside from fishing—including those from already marginalized communities like the Houma Indians and the Vietnamese—were watching their futures dissolve before their eyes. On Grand Isle, Louisiana, one family had erected a faux graveyard with simple white crosses to commemorate everything they were about to lose. "Sandpiper," read one. "Seafood Gumbo." Nearby, handmade signs pleaded "Pray for Fishermen" and "God Help Us All."

In a gesture of solidarity, I suppose—and because planning and cooking a meal is among the few ways I know to impose order on the world—I decided to throw a dinner party celebrating the region's cuisine. "Please join us," I wrote in my e-mail. "We are supporting Gulf fishermen and eating food we may not always have the luxury of eating." ("Oily gumbo, mmmm," came back the first response. "Too bad I'll be out of town.")

I pulled down John Besh's 2009 cookbook, *My New Orleans*, and lingered over its black-and-white portraits of oystermen and maps depicting the habitats of the brown shrimp, crab, and crawfish that form

ILLUSTRATION BY GARY HOYLAND

the basis of the cuisine Besh serves at his six restaurants. Eventually I settled on a menu. We would start with Sazeracs, the official cocktail of New Orleans, then move on to Besh's Crabmeat Maison and Louisiana shrimp and andouille over grits, finishing with Southern biscuits piled with strawberries and fresh whipped cream.

An ex-Marine and father of four young sons, Besh grew up "surrounded by cypress knees and tupelo trees," and his entire 374-page book is a love letter to the singular culture and cuisine of his home. I phoned him the next day—we had met back in my *Gourmet* days—to find out how he was faring amid all the mess, and he told me about a recent late-night fishing trip he'd made with his oldest son on Lake Pontchartrain. The two had gone out in hopes of nabbing a couple of trout, he said, only to encounter 24 desperate shrimp boats shut out of their normal offshore haunts. "It just killed me," he said, "because at that point I realized I may not have this life to pass on to my children."

You could already sense the change up in Manhattan. I had read that NOAA was inspecting seafood from the Gulf, so I felt reasonably assured that whatever I bought would be safe—and the whole point of the dinner was to support the fishermen by buying the seafood they could still land. But it turned out to be not so easy. The salesman at my local Whole Foods told me the frozen Gulf shrimp had been procured long before the accident. The guy the gourmet food shop Citarella—once I had convinced him that I was serious—maintained he had nothing whatever from the region. Eventually I connected with the fishmonger for the seafood wholesaler Wild Edibles, who said he could get me the fresh lump crabmeat (from Alabama) and the few dozen shrimp (from Florida) that I would need.

In the end, we were seven around the table, including Ruth Reichl, my former boss at *Gourmet*, Paige Orloff, a food writer, and their husbands. We sat on the patio, sipped our golden-hued Sazeracs (they contain rye and absinthe and were thus to have the benefit of blunting Ruth's expert palate), and considered the fact that entire generations of shrimp, crab, and oysters were probably being wiped out as we spoke. Ruth mentioned that the Gulf was one of only two spawning grounds for bluefin tuna, which were already under siege from overfishing, and lamented that they might soon be gone for good. (In late May, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a petition to protect the fish under the Endangered Species Act.)

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Over an improvised take on Besh's crab salad (my trial run had shown his "maison" style to be far too rich for our northern blood), which I'd mounded on baby greens from the local farmers' market and accessorized with sweet snap peas and tomatoes, we talked about BP's use of dispersants. As of June 27, the company had applied some 1.5 million gallons of the likely toxic chemicals—which neither neutralize nor destroy the oil but simply move it underwater, where it can circulate and kill fish larvae and plankton for years. Back in the kitchen, stirring my grits and trying to figure out why my shrimp sauce was taking so long to thicken, I overheard my guests debating whether it was more humane to rehabilitate all those pelicans and sea turtles or to simply let them die in peace.

I finally served and sat back down, and we raised our glasses to the shrimpers before digging in. I recounted Besh's fishing story and told of the article I'd seen about the devastatingly high rates of divorce, suicide, and alcoholism among the residents of Prince William Sound since the *Exxon Valdez* spilled 11 million gallons of oil there in 1989. "Long after Tony [Hayward] and the other CEOs have gone their way," Besh had said, "the people of the Gulf Coast are going to be suffering from all this."

After everyone was gone, I stood at the sink rinsing wine glasses and replayed the evening in my head. I heard Ruth admitting how, after reading an op-ed piece about a woman swimming around in the muck, she had become too depressed to continue following coverage of the spill, and I winced at the memory of my own claim of finite emotional space. "We've all become so fat and happy," I recalled Besh saying, "that we no longer see ourselves as a country. We're just worried about what affects us in our neighborhoods."

Our dinner had at least taken us outside ourselves for a while, and the vibrant, wild-tasting shellfish had reminded us what we will have lost if we're relegated to eating the farm-raised stuff. (A few weeks later, researchers would find oil in the Gulf's blue crabs and discover that it had begun to seep into Lake Pontchartrain.)

Towel-drying the last of my pans, I glanced over at Besh's lovingly written book and thought about the photos inside of family and friends gathered around home-cooked meals to mark one occasion or another. In days to come, the heat of andouille sausage or the perfume of sun-sweetened strawberries might pull my own guests back to this night, when we came together to celebrate a people and a place and to recognize how food can unite us. How it can slow us down and remind us what's important.

SHORT TAKE

Creole Crab & Tomatoes

6 ripe tomatoes in season
½ c. mayonnaise
1 branch fresh basil
2 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
2 c. jumbo lump crabmeat
6 chive blossoms
salt
Creole spice:
2 tbsp. celery salt
1 tbsp. sweet paprika
1 tbsp. coarse sea salt
1 tbsp. fresh ground pepper
1 tbsp. garlic powder
1 tbsp. onion powder
2 tsp. cayenne pepper
½ tsp. ground allspice

Stone, king, or dungeness crabs are good sustainable options for this recipe, which was adapted from Louisiana chef John Besh's cookbook, *My New Orleans*.

Chop the basil (save a few leaves for later) and mix it with the mayonnaise, lemon juice, and mustard. Add the crab, stirring gently. Mix the Creole spice and season the crab salad to taste. Slice and season the tomatoes, top with the crabmeat, basil leaves, and chive blossoms, and enjoy. Serves 6.