
HOLY CRAB!

STEPHANIE MEE REDISCOVERS HER ROOTS AND COMES OUT OF HER SHELL. PHOTOS: LUCKY 8.

ANY restaurant that urges you to forget your table manners, forget forks and spoons, and just dig in with your bare hands is pretty ace in my book, and even more so if the menu consists of premium seafood and icy cold beers. So when I heard that Jakarta's famous Louisiana-inspired seafood restaurant, The Holy Crab, was opening a branch in Bali, I was first in line to get in.

Being the Nova Scotian girl I am, I know a thing or two about crustaceans and Cajun food. Nova Scotia is famous for its lobster as well as its historical connection and culinary contribution to Louisiana.

Cajun roots and cuisine can be traced back to the 1600s when French immigrants settled in Acadia, the area now known as Nova Scotia. Here they resided peacefully until 1713 when Acadia was granted to the British, who promptly decided that all residents who refused to bow to the British government would be deported. The majority of French-speaking exiles ended up in Louisiana where the term 'Acadien' was shortened by English speakers to Cadien, and later to Cajun.

Despite my love of lobster and my hometown Cajun connection, I have never actually been to Louisiana, so I enlisted a friend to join me for the feed. Hailing from Texas, Neiman had crossed the border into Louisiana more times than he could count, so he assured me he would know the real deal when it came to Creole cuisine.

Located on bustling Jalan Petitenget, The Holy Crab is easy to spot with its bright white two-storey exterior, gleaming walls of windows, and ample parking area. Inside the feeling is fresh and modern with brick walls and exposed pipes painted white, and fun and funky chalkboards proclaiming the seafood on offer. Guests have the choice of sitting at the inviting wooden bar, one of the well-spaced tables, or in one of the roomy booths along the walls.

The menu and concept is the brainchild of executive chef and owner, Albert Wijaya, who spent many years studying food science and culinary arts in America. After experiencing numerous hands-on Louisiana style feasts, he decided the concept would be perfect for Indonesia. After all, eating by hand is part of Indonesia's culinary culture, and seafood is a staple in this multi-island nation.

The first thing we noticed upon being seated was how warm, welcoming and well spoken the staff were. Not only were they offering

up a mix of cheerful Balinese and southern hospitality, but they were quick to explain the ins and outs of the menu to us. All of the seafood at Holy Crab is imported from either the US or Canada or sourced locally, and each dish is priced per 100 grams.

Options include snow crab legs from Alaska, Nova Scotia lobsters, Dungeness crab, king crab legs, or local crawfish, mud crab, shrimps or clams. They also offer snacks like crispy fish fingers, onion rings and deep fried chicken wings, and sides like sausage and sweet corn, which Neiman assures me are a must at any Louisiana seafood feed.

Once we decided on a few favourites, the staff laid down a huge piece of white paper on the table and set us up with paper towels, plastic bibs festooned with bright red crabs, and the only utensils we needed: mallets, metal crackers and scissors.

Soon we were taking off our rings and rolling up our sleeves as the staff came out with plastic bags filled with saucy seafood goodness and ceremoniously dumped the concoctions on our table. First up were plump shrimps smothered in a chunky garlic sauce followed by mud crab and massive king crab legs doused in the house special sauce. Finally, a trio of crayfish, corn and sausage completed the spread.

As an added perk you can customise the heat level of your sauce to your liking. At Neiman's insistence we opted for mild (which prompted me to openly question whether he was a true blue Texan), but if I had it my way, I would have gone for the mouth searing and slightly masochistic Holy Moly. Medium and spicy are also on offer.

At this point I should mention that this is definitely not a first date place, unless you consider making a huge mess a great first impression. This is a free-for-all, cracking, snapping, slurping and munching kind of spot where you dig in with gusto and do what you have to to extract that last tender morsel of delicate crab meat or silky lobster roe.

By the end of the meal we were sated, yet still salivating over the freshness of the food and the intensity of the sauces. For both of us the meal surpassed the test for the quality of the crustaceans and the authenticity of the Cajun flavours, and it definitely earned a place on the list of memorable meals. At The Holy Crab getting messy is a given, but it sure is worth it, and a whole lot of fun. ♦

www.theholycrab.co.id



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