

Crayfish Tales
by
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#17

The Crayfish Races at San Miguel

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As soon as I found crayfish in Arizona waters, I spent many exciting days searching for, and finding, this delicacy Swedes call 'kräftor'. I found them in the Phoenix canals. I found them on the Indian Reservations among Apaches and Navajos. Practically every summer vacation was spent with my family going to one crayfish hangout or another in this gorgeously interesting state with both deserts and high country Ponderosa forests.

And often I came home with fair amounts of crayfish in iced coolers. And following the traditions that I learned as a kid in Stockholm, I planned a crayfish party practically every time I came home from an August vacation. In boxes in my basement office, I had collected party decorations for traditional crayfish parties. Table cloths with pictures of red crayfish and sprigs of dill; small pointed paper hats with rubber bands to keep them at a jaunty angle on heads; a couple of papier maché crayfish for decoration and then of course, the traditional lantern in the form of a smiling man in the moon. All well decorated Swedish crayfish parties have these lanterns hanging gaily around the festive table set with plates, crayfish knives, schnapps glasses and assorted side dishes around the heaping dishes with red shelled, dill adorned crayfish.

Soon after my wife and I with two children and our boxer dog Tessa had arrived in Arizona, we also joined the Swedish VASA lodge in Phoenix, an ethnic association of Swedes outside Sweden. Here were lots of people who also loved crayfish, or at least knew about them and pretended to enjoy keeping up this age-old tradition. Most of these lodge members were eager participants in a real crayfish party, including even Consul Anderson, the official Swedish representative to the state of Arizona.

Somewhere I had read about a party where the participants, the guests, were excitingly entertained with frog races. Yes, each guests was assigned a frog with a number, and under a great deal of hoopla, the frogs were let loose to run out of a container into a large circular area. The frog that first crossed the outer line became the winner. What a great idea for a party we thought, my wife and I. Why not incorporate that idea into our party and use crayfish instead of frogs? Soon we decided this would be a great way of breaking the ice, if there ever was any on a sweltering August day in deserty Phoenix.

But all the crayfish we brought with us from some distant crayfish lake on an Arizona Indian reservation had already been cooked! I needed some live crayfish to act as race

horses for our guests. That's when the Phoenix canals came to the rescue. Not far from our house in Scottsdale ran a canal feeding irrigation water to citrus groves. In one area of the nearby canal was a flood gate creating a backwater where I had caught crayfish before. So, a couple of days before the party, I took a few open net traps with me to this flood gate. Within an hour I had a couple of dozen crayfish that would do just fine for my party races. Merrily I returned home with my steeds in a cooler in the back of the car.

As the sun was setting and the blistering temperatures finally normalized for human habitation, guests were arriving at our house at San Miguel. With consul Anderson and his gorgeous Martha, we were ready for some music to add to the merriment. Consul Anderson was one of the few I ever met who played the saw. Yes, a seemingly ordinary saw held between his legs and with an ordinary violin bow, he could entice exciting Swedish dance music from this unusual instrument. But he was not alone. Our friends John, Anders and Nils had their instruments also. John was the pianist, so for him we had to roll out our spinet piano to the patio, but Nils with his clarinet and Anders with his accordion were ready to join Consul Anderson at the drop of a hat. Soon we had rolled the piano through the kitchen door and placed under the patio cover and before long music was swelling over the badminton court and some guests started to dance.

But the main events were yet to come. One was of course the eating of the crayfish. The other was the races. The crayfish races. To prepare for the crayfish races I had drawn a large circle with chalk on the concrete of the badminton court. In the center was an upside-down pie pan where the crayfish would be kept until let loose for the race. But before this could be done I had to individually mark the crayfish with a number so each guest could take their choice steed number. But putting numbers on the back of crayfish is not as easy as it might seem. As crayfish in captivity have to be kept cool and moist, what would possibly stick to their shell as identification? I tried a black marking pen, but the ink immediately smeared and ran all over. Finally I settled on my wife's nail polish, which after a few dabbling mistakes managed to stay put long enough to let the guests pick their choices.

While friend Sam had his film camera rolling, perpetuating the event, I placed the crayfish under the pie pan, one crayfish for each guest. After a heated discussion as to who got what number, we reached an agreement and the race was on. Anders played a 'drum roll' on the accordion and the crayfish were off. Just as at a real horse race, everybody started cheering on their number and the backyard was soon filled with hootings and hollerings. Some crayfish just sat there doing nothing to their owner's dismay. Others slowly started moving this way or that. Some race participants got a little extra excited and tried to egg on their steeds with their hands after vocal objections from the rest of the crowd.

While the beginning of the race was evolving, I hurried into the kitchen for the prizes of the race. We had a bottle of fine wine as first prize, a sixpack of beer for the second prize and an airline souvenir in the form of a miniature bottle of liquor as third prize.

In the meantime some of the crayfish had almost reached the outer border of the race

course, the chalk line circling the area. Excitement grew more intense as two crayfish aimed head to head for the finishing line. But just as the finishing line was within reach, one of the crayfish made a 180° turn and headed back to the stables. Much dismay and howling from its owner, while the other crayfish crossed the line to the cheerings of its owner. By now the other crayfish had returned his run for the chalk line, and the third crayfish was ready to make a fight for it. Finally the second and third prize winners were duly noted, and I was ready to settle all the grumblings by divvying out the prizes. The musicians struck up their instruments and the excitement was over.

Well, not quite. I had not counted on our beloved Boxer Tessa who was lying under the crayfish table watching the proceedings. What I didn't count on was that she hates crayfish more than the average boxer dog. Ever since we took her up to Hawley lake and caught feisty, big clawed crayfish that nipped her blunt sniffing nose, she had hated the critters.

Suddenly the moment for her revenge had come, and before we realized what was her intent, she dashed out from under the table and made a bee-line for the winning crayfish just where it had crossed the finishing line. With a swift dash followed by a side ways streak to the back of the badminton court, she had come and gone with the winning crayfish in her mouth. What really happened under the oleander bushes we never determined, because the remnants of the crayfish were really not telling the whole story. But revenge she got, our beloved Tessa., the crayfish hating boxer.

In spite of this unexpected end to the crayfish race, the winning party still got their prize, and all was back to relative peace and quiet. By now, Joyce had finished the setting of the table under the patio cover with three heaping platters of red crayfish among the side dishes of herrings, sardines, toasted bread and slices of cheese of different kinds. The containers with akvavit were just out of the freezer and displayed rime frost on its glass as our guests gathered around the table looking for their place tags.

Martha, the consul's wife, occupied the place of honor and I helped her to the first crayfish, the biggest one decorating the heap of the platter. "Oh, how tasty" she cried while slurping the dilly brine off the big cray. Soon slurping and shell cracking was heard from all corners of the table and the party was soon in full swing. For a while, Sam walked around the table with his film camera to get glimpses of how the guests individually attacked the red shelled prey. Soon the first drink was ready and everybody sang the Swedish drinking song "First one goes" (Helan går) and the merriment soon had no limits.

People eat crayfish in different ways. There is the methodical ones, like me, who place the heads of the eaten crayfish in a row along the edge of the plate for all to see how many have been eaten. Then the most common sight, a heap of shells all over the plate so no one can count how many you have eaten. And why should they? In the corner of the patio stands a five gallon bucket for people who want to discard their shells after the plate starts to run over. After the 'First one goes' comes the "Next one goes" and after that nobody really cares about how many drinks are downed. For those who don't like the

hard liquor, beer may suffice or some white wine.

Actually, even some Swedes don't know how to eat crayfish. Not surprising among non-Swedes, but Swedes? For one thing, you need a crayfish knife to handle the hard shells. To get the juicy morsel out of each claw you need a crayfish knife, or at least a nut cracker. Fortunately, crayfish in northern states of the US tend to be of the big clawed kind with plenty of meat inside. The southern Louisiana kind, the red clawed swamp crawfish, has elongated claws that have little or no meat to spend effort on. That's why I prefer the crayfish I find in Arizona or the Signal crayfish of California that has big, juicy claws.

And then there are the females. Yes, female crayfish have an attraction just like many other female species have. When it comes to crayfish, the attraction is roe. Toward the end of the season, in August and September, female crayfish usually have large gobs of roe under their shell. Anyone who appreciates caviar, finds this extra tidbit delectable and makes it a game to find and select the females without having to turn them over for sex identification. Yes, It can be done, and I am proud to have finally learned how to tell a female from a male without intrusive tail checking.

Finally most guests had their fill of crayfish. Dessert in the form of white and red grapes with crackers and cheese soon neutralized the salty after taste. Some more white wine, or maybe even a glass of liqueur, ended the feast, and those so inspired, trod the badminton court dance floor to the music of our musical guests.

And good old boxer Tessa enjoyed the party knowing she had finally had her revenge.

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The End