

'Tis the Season to Dine on Dungeness

By Jennifer Wake



Pamela Stewart and Cindy Silberman ready for crab at the Holy Trinity Cultural Center in Moraga
Photo Andy Scheck

There are many challenges in throwing a dinner party, but when the menu requires 700 pounds of cracked crab to feed more than 300 guests, planning is everything.

Each year, between January and March, dozens of organizations in the area prepare buckets and tubs of legs, bodies and claws from our popular West Coast crustacean for their annual crab feeds. The Moraga Valley Kiwanis, which will host its eighth annual crab feed Saturday, Feb. 9 at the Holy Trinity Cultural Center in Moraga, amasses an army of volunteers to pull off one of their biggest fundraisers of the year.

"We start planning 11 months ahead," Kiwanis crab feed co-chair Sam Sperry said.

In addition to coordinating the crab order, preparation and serving at the event, more than half of the Kiwanis' 60 members help oversee the silent auction, the set up and tear down, cook additional food for the dinner, and man the beer, wine and cocktail operation.

"Jeff Koester is the other co-chair, and he handles the food and beverages," Sperry said. "Jeff makes fresh pasta with spaghetti sauce, salad and his own special recipe for salsa that he serves with chips as an appetizer. He starts at 8 a.m. doing the food preparation so we're ready when we open the door at 6 p.m. We also work with the East Bay Center for Volunteers to get high school students to do the serving. They have tip jars, and last year they raised \$1,000 in tips."

The bulk of the money raised at the Kiwanis crab feed comes from the silent auction. "Tim Freeman is our silent auction coordinator and has gotten roughly 100 items donated," said Sperry, who, with wife Susan, has hosted a celebrity dinner at their house as an auction item where local "celebrities" like Moraga School Superintendent Rick Schafer, Town Councilman Mike Metcalf, and Town Manager Phil Vince serve dinner to the winning bidder.

"We are aiming to give away \$35,000 in grants this year," Sperry added.

"The crab feed is clearly one of our largest fundraisers."

Other organizations holding local crab feeds in the coming days and weeks include the Lamorinda 4H club and the Soroptimist International of 24-680. The 4H's feed is on Feb. 9 at the Martinez Boys and Girls Club, with proceeds supporting the youth fair and awards. The Soroptimist inaugural feed is on Sunday, Feb. 24 at Oakwood Athletic Club in Lafayette. It benefits women and girls in local communities and throughout the world.

Like many organizations in the area, the Kiwanis orders its crab from a local seafood wholesale distributor that delivers the fresh Dungeness on the morning of the event – packed in ice, cracked, and cleaned – in large shipping containers wrapped in plastic.

Folsom-based Pacific Crab Company, which specializes in crab feeds, suggests organizations order at least two pounds of crab per person, which equates to about one pound after the crab has been cracked and cleaned. Sperry said the Kiwanis increased their crab order this year to be sure they would have enough for everyone, and even some extra to sell at the door after the event.

"Last year, we used every bit of the 675 pounds Jeff ordered," he said.

Nearly 8 million pounds of Dungeness crab are caught on average each year, according to Fish and Game records, but this year's season had a late start due to the Nov. 8 oil spill in the San Francisco Bay. Fortunately, the opening was delayed by only two weeks, opening on Dec. 1 after the state declared local crab free of contamination.

That was good news for organizations like the Moraga Valley Kiwanis, which raises nearly \$15,000 each year at the crab feed to fund grants for various local charities.

When it is all over, the volunteers will take a much needed break. Then two weeks after the event, Sperry said he will meet with the Cultural Center's event coordinator to see what went right and what they should change for next year.

Then they will start planning all over again.

For anyone interested in purchasing any remaining tickets for the Kiwanis event, contact Paul Ratto at (925) 899-9536. For ticket information regarding the Soroptimist crab feed, call (925) 890-1167.

Want to spice up your crab?

Boil it with herbs.

- 1/4 cup pickling spice
- 3 tablespoons sliced fresh chives
- 2 tablespoons yellow mustard seeds
- 2 tablespoons black peppercorns
- 2 tablespoons crushed red pepper flakes
- 1 tablespoon celery seeds
- 1 tablespoon sliced fresh ginger
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 5 crushed bay leaves

Tie all the spices in a muslin bag and add to the boiling liquid with sea salt to taste.

(Source: <http://www.chow.com/recipes/10603>)