

# Chesapeake Bay

## WINING & DINING

The wines of the region are a perfect match to the cuisine, which is a uniquely American blend of the down-home and the elevated.

BY DAVE MCINTYRE

When you envision Chesapeake Bay and food, what comes to mind? Oysters, rockfish (striped bass) and crabs. It's true: the quintessential Chesapeake meal is a bushel of steamed crabs, with diners seated at picnic tables covered with brown paper, their fingers stained with the pungent paprika-based spice mix called Old Bay, surrounded by piles of empty crab shells, pitchers of beer and rolls of paper towels.

But "Chesapeake cuisine" is much more varied, melding cultural influences from Europe and Africa, fertile farmland, and American history into a rich and diverse menu.

In the early days of the United States, Chesapeake cuisine was nearly synonymous with American cuisine. "If you look at any of the old Americana cookbooks, they read much like Chesapeake Bay cookbooks," says John Shields, chef/owner of Gertrude's Restaurant in Baltimore and author of three cookbooks focusing on the Chesapeake Bay. "Dignitaries from around the world came to Washington to deal with the new government. Thomas Jefferson brought chefs from France, and they took food indigenous to here and created dishes worthy of serving to a president. When the rest of the world saw American cooking, it was this Chesapeake cuisine."

The largest estuary in the continental United States, the Chesapeake stretches 200 miles from the mouth of the Susquehanna River in the north to the Atlantic Ocean at its southern end. The Chesapeake watershed covers parts of six states, including New York and West Virginia.

Today's Chesapeake flavors vary as you wander the bay and its tributaries. Baltimore's sausage-heavy cooking is influenced by immigration from Germany, Poland and Italy. In the northern parts of the Eastern Shore, most of the original settlers hailed from England, "so there's a background of English cooking—a little bland and simple, without doing much to the seafood," Shields notes. There was also some German influence from Amish Mennonite communities on the Eastern Shore. Further south, on both sides of the bay, African and Caribbean influences came into play as slaves contributed their own accents to the cuisine. At the bay's mouth, in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, Norfolk-style cooking developed, featuring salty flavors of Smithfield ham.

Shields points to the stuffed ham of St. Mary's County in southern Maryland as a regional specialty that symbolizes the diverse contributions of different cultures. A fresh ham (not the dry-cured type of Smithfield fame) is brined and then stuffed with a mixture of vegetables. The recipe can vary but typically includes kale, cabbage and onions, along with several spices. The result combines the English tradition of brining with African and Caribbean greens and spices.

The "eat local" movement has had its influence on modern Chesapeake cuisine through the growth of specialty farmers. Todd Gray, chef and co-owner with his wife Ellen of Equinox restaurant in Washington, D.C., grew up along the James River in the Hampton Roads area, but today he defines the bay region broadly.

Chesapeake Style  
Shrimp & Grits

“The Chesapeake Bay region is so much more than the bay itself,” Gray says. “You have to include the Virginia Piedmont along the Blue Ridge Mountains up to the Tuscarora Valley of Pennsylvania.”

That regional bounty includes wine. Virginia now boasts 157 wineries, while Maryland has 37—and counting. Winemakers like to compare the climate here to Bordeaux, with humidity and the potential for rain (even hurricanes) at harvest making each vintage an adventure. As a result, the wines tend toward an Old World balance that emphasizes acidity and freshness rather than big, bold California-style ripeness.

While Virginia has a reputation for Viognier and Cabernet Franc, Albariño and Petit Manseng are strong challengers for pride of place among whites, while wildly perfumed Petit Verdot is increasingly popular among reds. Maryland’s crisp white wines from Seyval Blanc, a French-American hybrid that resembles Sauvignon Blanc, seem to be created for oysters.

Oysters, shrimp, grits—Gray likes to take regional ingredients and create a Chesapeake-accented version of dishes that people might associate with other locales. “We have our own style because we can draw from these resources,” he explains. “I’ll take grits from Byrd Mill in Ashland, Virginia, brussels sprouts from Loudoun County and shrimp from the bay, and put that up against Carolina shrimp and grits anytime.”

Mark Salter, chef at the Inn at Pery Cabin on St. Michael’s Island, is literally surrounded by the Chesapeake and revels in the seasonality of the region’s cuisine. “In summer and fall, it’s definitely crab, either steamed and spiced—served with beer, corn on the cob and potatoes—or a crab cake or soft shells. In winter, the favored dish is definitely oysters, such as Choptank Sweets from the bay,” Salter says. His menu features a “Chesapeake Sampler” that includes a paté made with smoked blue fish, a crab cake, a crab spring roll and fish and chips from his native Britain, but made with rock fish from the bay.

Salter admits he’s not such a fan of the bay’s springtime delicacy, shad roe, which is known for its strong, gamy and, well, fishy flavor. So he adds a modern twist. “I poach shad roe slowly in chicken stock with bay leaf and thyme, then when it’s cold I slice it and sauté it in bacon fat,” he explains. “The more traditional method is to sauté it raw, and then it’s very fishy. If you can tone it down a bit, it’s actually palatable.”

The Chesapeake’s traditional bounty has been threatened by pollution from industry and agriculture. But rock fish, once scarce, has recovered, and oysters, clams and shrimp are now being successfully farmed. Shad and shad roe are increasingly scarce and the bay’s famous blue crabs have dwindled due to overfishing and pollution. Those backyard crab picking feasts are now an expensive rarity.

So far, the aquafarming industry has not figured out how to cultivate blue crabs. While efforts continue to clean up the Chesapeake and restore the crab population, the region’s cuisine will continue to evolve and adapt to new influences, as it has for centuries.

### Chesapeake Style Shrimp & Grits

Chef Todd Gray of Equinox restaurant in Washington, D.C., combines locally sourced ingredients to create this Chesapeake Bay take on a low-country classic.

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

6 thyme sprigs  
2 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced  
24 Marvesta shrimp or other head-on shrimp, peeled and deveined  
1 tablespoon freshly grated lemon zest  
2 dozen brussels sprouts  
1 cup Tamworth bacon or other smoked bacon, diced  
1 cup shallots, sliced  
3 tablespoons butter  
Salt and pepper, to taste

#### For the mascarpone grits

2 cups milk  
3 cups heavy cream  
1 tablespoon butter  
3 cups coarse ground Byrd Mill Grits or other coarse ground grits  
½ cup mascarpone cheese  
Salt and pepper, to taste

**Prepare the shrimp:** Take a baking sheet or half-sheet tray and drizzle with olive oil, then sprinkle with thyme sprigs and sliced garlic cloves. Place shrimp onto the sheet and drizzle with additional olive oil, then sprinkle on the lemon zest. Season the shrimp with salt and pepper, and refrigerate while preparing the grits.

**Prepare the grits:** Bring milk, cream and butter to a simmer. Sprinkle in the grits and stir gently for 45 minutes on low heat until cooked. Add seasoning and mascarpone cheese. Keep grits warm.

**Finish the dish:** Separate the leaves from the sprouts, tearing them from the root base. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add leaves and cook 1 minute, drain and shock in ice water. Drain again.

Heat a medium-sized sauté pan over medium heat. Add bacon, shallots and butter. Cook 3 minutes, then add the sprout petals and cook until warmed thoroughly.

Preheat a broiler to high. Place shrimp under broiler and cook until heads are pink and shrimp is firm to touch, approximately 4 minutes. Take 4 large plates, spoon grits into center of each dish, top with sprouts and bacon. Place a set of 6 roasted shrimp on top of the sprouts and serve immediately. *Serves 4.*

**Wine Recommendations:** Gray suggests the Chester Gap Cuvee Manseng, a blend of about ⅔ Petit Manseng and ⅓ Viognier, from Virginia, as the perfect complement to this dish. It combines acidity to match the shrimp with richness for the mascarpone and the grits. Outside the mid-Atlantic, you may find it easier to find a Juraçon Sec, such as the 2008 Château Jolys.

### Rockfish Imperial

John Shields combines Crab Imperial, a traditional Chesapeake Bay preparation, with the region’s famed rockfish (striped bass) for this elegant dish. Adapted from *Chesapeake Bay Cooking with John Shields*.

#### Crabmeat Imperial

4 tablespoons (½ stick) butter



Rockfish Imperial

2 tablespoons diced green bell pepper  
2 tablespoons diced red bell pepper or pimiento  
½ cup chopped mushrooms  
¼ cup mayonnaise  
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard  
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce  
¼ teaspoon Tabasco sauce  
1 teaspoon capers, drained and chopped  
¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper  
1 teaspoon Old Bay seasoning  
1 pound jumbo or lump crabmeat, picked over for shells

#### Rockfish

Six rockfish fillets, 6–7 ounces each, skin removed  
Salt and pepper to taste  
Olive oil for searing  
Crab Imperial (recipe follows)  
Imperial Sauce (recipe follows)

#### Imperial sauce

1 egg, beaten

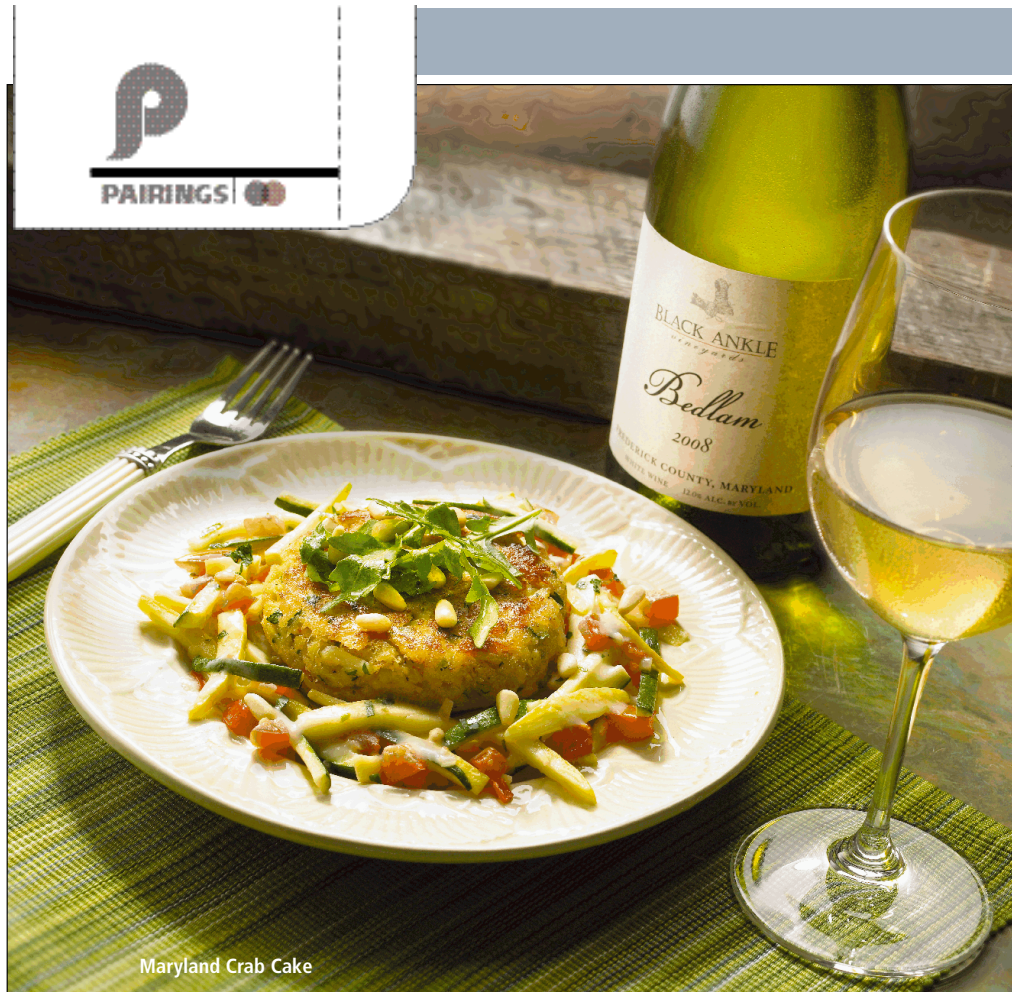
¼ cup mayonnaise  
Pinch paprika  
1 tablespoon chopped parsley

**Make the Crabmeat Imperial:** Melt the butter in a small skillet and sauté the bell peppers and mushrooms until soft. Set aside. Combine the mayonnaise, mustard, Worcestershire, Tabasco, capers, pepper and Old Bay in a small bowl and mix well. Add the sautéed peppers and mushrooms. Place the crabmeat in a mixing bowl and pour the mixture over it. Toss gently. Refrigerate until ready to use.

**Make the Imperial sauce:** Combine all the ingredients in a small bowl and mix well. (*Makes ½ cup*)

**Prepare the rockfish:** Preheat the oven to 350°F. Season both sides of the rockfish fillets with salt and pepper. Lightly coat the bottom of a well-heated oven-proof skillet with olive oil. Place fillets flesh-side-down into very hot skillet and sear for 1 minute. Turn the fish over and sear the other side for 1 minute. Remove pan from heat and flip fish over once again. Divide the crab imperial evenly onto the top each of the fillets.

**Finish the dish:** Place the skillet back into the oven and bake for about 18 to 20 minutes. Remove skillet or pan from oven and top the imperial with the imperial sauce. Increase the oven temperature to 400°F.



Maryland Crab Cake

Return the skillet to the oven and brown the fillets for about 3 to 5 minutes, or until lightly browned. Remove from oven and serve immediately. *Serves 6.*

**Wine Recommendation:** Shields recommends pairing this dish with a Virginia Viognier, such as White Hall Vineyards, near Charlottesville, a lean and well-structured Viognier that stands up to the mayonnaise in the Crab Imperial. More widely available would be any of several Australian Viogniers, such as the 2008 Eden Valley, from Yalumba.

### Maryland Crab Cake with Batons of Zucchini & Squash, French Tarragon & Toasted Pine Nut Butter Sauce

The Chesapeake Bay classic crab cake takes on an earthy component in this veggie-rich interpretation from Chef Mark Salter of the Inn at Perry Cabin in St. Michaels, Maryland.

#### Crab cakes

- 1 pound Maryland jumbo lump crab
- ½ cup mayonnaise
- 1 egg
- ¼ teaspoon Old Bay Seasoning
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- Juice from half lemon
- 2 ounces Panko Japanese bread crumbs
- Olive oil

#### Vegetables

- 2 medium-size zucchini
- 2 medium-size yellow squash
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 shallot, peeled and cut into small dice
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 2 large plum tomatoes, diced
- 1 teaspoon chopped tarragon
- Salt and pepper to taste

#### Citrus beurre blanc sauce

- 1½ cups white wine
- 3 shallots, diced
- ½ bay leaf
- 1 sprig fresh thyme
- 3 tablespoons heavy cream
- 10 ounces unsalted butter, cut into small cubes
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Salt and pepper

#### Garnish

- 2 ounces toasted pine nuts
- 2 ounces cleaned arugula
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper

**Make the crab cakes:** In a large mixing bowl, mix the mayonnaise, egg, Old Bay seasoning, Dijon mustard, chopped parsley, Worcestershire sauce and lemon juice. Pick over the crab meat carefully to remove shell traces, and then fold into the mixture. Add the breadcrumbs. Chill mixture for 20 minutes before shaping into 5-ounce cakes. Set aside.

**Prepare the vegetables:** Trim the zucchini and squash and cut into matchstick-sized batons. Heat a sauté pan over medium heat, then pour in the olive oil. Add the batons of zucchini and squash and sauté for 1–2 minutes. Add the diced shallot and chopped garlic, followed by the diced tomato and chopped tarragon. Season with salt and pepper.

**Make the beurre blanc sauce:** In a saucepan, bring to a boil the white wine, shallots, fresh thyme and bay leaf and cook until reduced to 3 tablespoons. Add the heavy cream and bring back to the boil. Remove from heat and slowly add the cubed unsalted butter, whisking constantly after each addition. Finish the sauce with fresh lemon juice, salt and pepper.

**Assemble the dish:** Preheat the oven to 375°F. Sauté the crab cakes in olive oil until lightly browned on each side. Bake cakes in the oven for 10 minutes. Remove from heat. Place the vegetables in center of plate, arrange crab cake on top and spoon sauce around. Sprinkle some toasted pine nuts on top and garnish with cleaned arugula that has been tossed with olive oil and kosher salt. *Serves 4.*

**Wine Recommendation:** Pair it with the Black Ankle Vineyards Bedlam, a riotous white blend from Maryland's new star winery. Made of Viognier, Chardonnay, Gruner Veltliner, Albariño and Muscat, the Bedlam, like Salter's cuisine, takes accents from around the world and melds them into a uniquely Chesapeake flavor. In a pinch, you could substitute a California white blend, such as Conundrum or Big House White. **W**

PHOTO: JON VAN GORDER