

The Soft-Shell Hard Sell

The Ordinary's Mike Lata shows us how to cook soft-shell crabs

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Cooking

Photo & Video: Dave Katz/ Tasting Table

If you've never touched a live soft-shell crab before, the tactile sensation is both captivating and arresting: The skin is somehow both smooth and velvety, the crab's pearlescent underbelly feeling like a cross between a fresh rose petal and the butteriest leather coat you've ever thumbed.

"We call them 'silkie,' because their skin is so soft," chef Mike Lata says in our Test Kitchen, showing us the still-moving crabs he's brought from his Charleston seafood restaurant, [The Ordinary](#) (Lata's also the chef/owner of [FIG](#)).

Lata and everyone else in [Charleston](#) are infatuated with their local soft-shell crabs, so much so that the city's chefs race to be the first to put them on menus. Why? For one, they're seasonal—around right now, and through September, if we're lucky. Lata says, "Soft-shell crabs are the equivalent of the first [tomatoes](#) when they come into season: a true delicacy."



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Then it's all about the texture of the crustaceans, which are actually [blue crabs](#), plucked out of the water when their exoskeletons have just molted off, leaving a pliable shell behind. You eat the whole darn thing, which, to the uninitiated, might seem daunting. But if they're cooked properly, you bite through a crisp, crackly exterior, crunching through the legs and the claws, to the [juicy, almost pillowy meat](#) inside.

To get the crustaceans to that pristine state, don't do too much to them: "They're the perfect ingredient. The chef needs to get out of the way and just use the best technique," Lata says.

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For him, that means buying live crabs (you should, too), getting them ready to cook by using [scissors](#) to cut off their faces and then taking off the tail and the gills. ("If you've never seen a soft-shell crab killed, it can seem barbaric," Lata warns.) He then dredges them ever so lightly in Old Bay-spiked cornmeal and gently cooks them in more bubbling [butter](#) than you might want to imagine until they're golden brown ([see the recipe](#)).

Once they're out of the pan, Lata hits them with salt and tops them with an herb-and-radish salad dotted with briny, tartar sauce-inspired capers and cornichons. Then he goes straight for the back leg where it connects to the plump body.

"Most people go for the claws, but the back leg is where the most crabmeat is," Lata says with a smile.

We'll take his advice. If anyone has a leg up on these little guys, it's him.

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