



...at Canal Place

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Photography by: Lance C. Bell

When visitors to downtown Cumberland first approach the new Shops at Canal Place, the savory smells of seafood, garlic and seasonings from Crab Alley Seafood offer a welcome greeting. Conveniently located towards the beginning of the brick walkway leading to the complex, the restaurant caters to a clientele seeking fresh, quality seafood at affordable prices.

Open at Canal Place since early June, Crab Alley will soon give patrons a view of what will be the re-watered terminus of the C&O Canal, featuring donkey-pulled canal boat rides operated by the National Park Service. They can now watch steam trains operated by the Western Maryland Scenic Railroad chug into the station. Those sitting outside on the patio at tables with colorful umbrellas have a front seat view of all the activities. Large windows in the front ensure that everyone can enjoy the setting from the sizable interior, a replica of a Chesapeake and Ohio Canal boat warehouse.

After several years at Naves Crossroad, Crab Alley's owners John and Robin Pittman decided to move Crab Alley to Canal Place to better serve a larger clientele, especially visitors to Cumberland. Their hunch turned out to be accurate, according to Robin. "The move quadrupled the number of patrons who walk through our door," she says. "More are tourists than locals," she adds, but notes that a loyal group of regulars patronize the restaurant and others come from

Garrett County and Rocky Gap Lodge. Cyclists looking for a culinary treat after biking the canal trail are frequent guests.

"Having grown up on the Eastern shore, fresh steamed crabs instead of precooked was something we both missed," says Robin. "And we have found that there are many others who crave crabs as we do in the area. To our knowledge, we are the only local restaurant with a state-of-the-art steam setup to serve fresh steamed crabs."

John adds, "I wanted to create the atmosphere of a crab house like those frequented down by the Chesapeake Bay."

The boat warehouse-crab house combination offers a spacious atmosphere, enhanced by the pale gold of the wooden walls. Dark wood trim from a former Frostburg business adds contrast and a Victorian touch to a wall dividing two dining areas. Nautical touches abound, such as netting, a block and tackle, lanterns and models of boats. Many are antiques. Patrons sit at tables fashioned from pastry tables once used in the former 7-Day Market. Robin likes to point out the paintings on the walls for sale by three local artists, including Bob Meredith, whose work depicts lighthouses or landmarks of the Maryland shore.

"Sometime in the future, we want to put a mezzanine around the top to have a place for private parties," she says.

A backstop to what was once a former bar in Frostburg provides a

mirror and blackboard behind the counter, where prices of different varieties of crabs are prominently listed. A dozen jumbo crabs are a relative bargain at \$60 per dozen, compared to Annapolis prices that run about \$100 per dozen, according to Robin. They currently sell 20 to 30 bushels per week.

"The quality of the meat makes all the difference in the world," says Robin on the crab they use for their crab cakes. "Ours are 5 ounces as opposed to most others, which usually run from 3 to 4 ounces each." Mustard and Worcestershire sauce are two of the seasonings used as part of their traditional Maryland crab cake recipe.

Other specialties like the Chesapeake Bay Crab Soup and Cream of Crab Soup are based on recipes from Robin's family. The breading recipe used in many dishes is a Robin original. "I love to cook," she says, and is happy to provide custom orders and meet dietary restrictions upon request.

Oysters, shrimp, scallops, clams, mussels, snow crab, lobster and several varieties of fish round out the seafood offerings. New York strip steak and chicken breast are available for landlubbers. Jambalaya, chili and salads are popular items. For lunch, besides several seafood choices, diners can choose an 8-ounce hamburger, grilled chicken, grilled bacon and cheese or a cheese steak sub. Side orders include such traditional favorites as fries, coleslaw, applesauce and hush puppies. Kids can choose among five dishes.

And, of course, there's always dessert — pie or cheesecake.

To quench the thirst, sodas, tea, lemonade and coffee are options. Domestic and imported beers and wines are also available. "We're the only restaurant in Cumberland with a Sunday liquor license," says Robin.

A crew of ten now works at Crab Alley under the helm of Captain John and his wife. Their youngest daughter Amanda helps out. "One of our goals is to provide jobs for the area," says John, who has a background in construction. Robin is a former nurse.

After moving to the Oldtown area 17 years ago to escape the urban pace and sprawl creeping into the Frederick area, the Pittmans now enjoy a more affordable lifestyle in the mountains of Allegany County. They see great potential for growth in their new home.

"Canal boat excursions, evening kayaking, cycling from Washington, D.C. to Pennsylvania, concerts and other activities at the festival grounds will all be nearby," Robin says.

"Tourists will not have to travel far for an inexpensive family experience."

Patrons can now enjoy concerts in a performance area adjacent to the restaurant; those sitting at the patio tables don't even have to move for a good seat. If they walk farther east on the brick paths, they can enjoy the fountain in the courtyard and browse the other shops that currently include a toy shop, bike shop, candy store, ice cream shop, coffee and pastry shop, artisan gallery, tour service, souvenirs and more. This summer, special activities are offered on Sunday afternoons for families.

Crab Alley is easy to find. From I-68 westbound, take exit 43-C, Downtown. Go left onto Harrison Street and on to the traffic signal at Mechanic and Harrison Streets. Go straight ahead into the Western Maryland Railway Station parking lot. From I-68, eastbound, take Exit 43-C, Downtown. Turn left onto Queen City Drive, go to the first traffic signal, turn left onto Harrison Street and on to the traffic signal

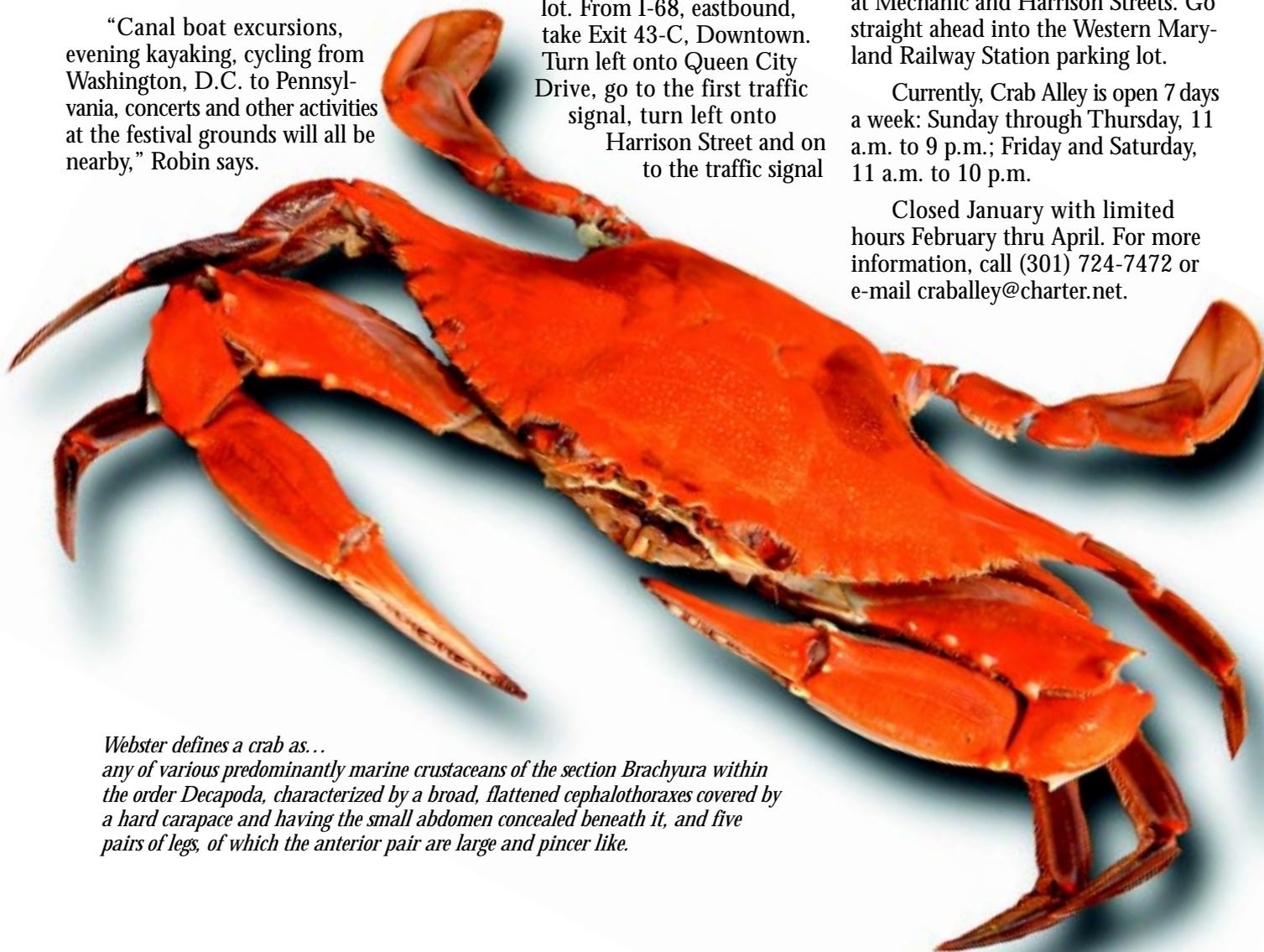


John and Robin Pittman, owners of Crab Alley.

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Currently, Crab Alley is open 7 days a week: Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Closed January with limited hours February thru April. For more information, call (301) 724-7472 or e-mail craballey@charter.net.



Webster defines a crab as... any of various predominantly marine crustaceans of the section Brachyura within the order Decapoda, characterized by a broad, flattened cephalothorax covered by a hard carapace and having the small abdomen concealed beneath it, and five pairs of legs, of which the anterior pair are large and pincer like.