



Joe's Stone Crab

A South Beach Legacy

by Seth Stutman

Since its inception in the early 20th century and subsequent boom after the discovery of its signature dish, Joe's Stone Crab has become synonymous with South Florida and gained celebrity status among residents, tourists, and the rich and famous.

As Joe's turns 96, a look at its history and traditions reveals how the establishment has developed within its South Beach surroundings. The restaurant has been part of an evolution from slums, racial tensions and world wars to the bustling social and economic hotbed that is it today.

Joe Weiss moved to balmy Florida from New York in the early 1900s to combat his asthma. Later, his wife, Jennie, and son, Jesse, joined him in Miami Beach, where he was working at the Sunshine Inn. After cooking in other neighborhood restaurants, Weiss opened Joe's Restaurant in 1920 at customers' urging. Joe manned the kitchen while Jennie served customers. Despite the heat, cramped quarters and constant mosquitoes, Joe's Restaurant gained popularity.

Menippe mercenaria, also known as stone crab, was noted in diaries as early as 1847, but how to cook it properly remained a mystery. In 1921, Professor George Parker traveled to Florida to write a pamphlet on the Portuguese man-of-war and to help open an aquarium. Parker, an ichthyologist by trade, befriended Joe and, one day, brought a burlap sack of live crabs to the restaurant for a cooking experiment. As it turned out, boiling and then chilling the crustaceans made them delectable. Joe served four or five claws, cracked, with hash browns, coleslaw and mayonnaise for a little more than a dollar. After the introduction of the stone crab, Joe's blossomed into a national landmark and became a cornerstone of the South Florida community.

Today, Joe's Stone Crab, in the hands of the fourth generation of Weisses, serves roughly 15,000 pounds of stone crab per week and has a staff of more than 300. In its 450-seat dining room, it is not uncommon to serve more than 1,000 meals every night.

Joe's owes much of its success to its employees. The majority of the staff has been there for years or decades, and many of the management team, wait staff and upper level employees have graduated upwards to their present-day positions.

The staff caters to an abundant cast of celebrities who have paraded through Joe's. Mobster Al Capone frequented Joe's in his heyday under the alias Al Brown. Jennie Weiss, always a straight shooter and ignorant of Al's infamy, remarked to him, "If I don't like somebody, I don't allow them to come in here, but you've always been a gentleman, and anytime you want to come into this restaurant, you can." As a token of his appreciation, every Mother's Day, Capone sent Jennie a large bouquet of flowers.

Every summer, when stone crabs are not in season, Joe's closes. Johnson elaborated, "We close for 10-12 weeks every year to paint, stain and clean to keep us looking the same every day.... It looks fresh, yet the classic history is still here." While the restaurant has undergone many restorations and expansions, it has remained elegant in its old world presentation—white linen tablecloths and waiters in tuxedos are part of Joe's ambience.

Despite its distinctive Miami flair, Joe's has successfully branched out and opened restaurants in Las Vegas and Chicago. Both locations rely heavily on Florida décor and historical references to the South Beach location, yet they feature more modern furnishings than the original.

Today, Joe's is still providing customers with sustenance despite the sputtering economy. Johnson remains confident about the future. "Joe's has weathered the Great Depression, World War I and II, and we will weather this," he said. "The menu is affordable to everyone and there are dishes for every price range."

Joe's Stone Crab is located at 11 Washington Avenue in Miami Beach. The restaurant is open early October through June. It also offers direct shipping via online or phone orders. For more information, visit www.joesstonecrab.com or call (800) 780-CRAB. 🌴