Notes from a kitchen

My perfect A well-dressed crab is always a highlight, says Sue Bailey

abbling in rock pools trying to scoop out sideways-scuttling tiny crabs was one of my childhood holiday pleasures in Cornwall. As compensation for our lack of any catch, my parents indulged us with finely fibred snow-white crabmeat, locally baked bread, floppy lettuce leaves and wedges of tomato for tea.

Later I learned that there are much simpler ways to catch crabs. Dangle a tasty morsel of bacon at the end of a line from the quayside to tempt them to clutch on with their claws. Collecting crabs in pots is for the professionals, who we need to support because this very sustainable catch has tended recently to mostly end up in Spanish or French fish markets.

The best crab that I have ever eaten was in Brancaster. It came fresh from a clapboard hut that backed on to the shoreline salt marsh, part-way through a North Norfolk coastal walk - a well-deserved reward. A crusty baguette, piled high with the fragrant white meat, creamy mayonnaise, sliced cucumber and a squeeze of lemon made a feast.

If you are lucky enough to be near the sea and able to buy fresh then choose a weighty lively crab, claws firmly clasped with an elastic band to avoid an unpleasant nip. Put it under a damp tea towel in the fridge to sedate it prior to killing and cooking.

If you prefer to buy your crab precooked or frozen, make sure the grey gills - 'dead man's fingers' - have been removed and scoop out the strongly flavoured brown meat from the main shell and extract the white meat from the claws. As with any seafood, I get enjoyment from detaching the meat to dress my own crab almost as much as I do from eating it.

I also remember dark savoury crab paste spread thinly on white-bread sandwiches. The filling came from fluted Shippam's jars that have a history dating back to the mid-18th century. Those sandwiches were a staple of our family childhood picnics, when we used to stop part-way to our beach hut on the Suffolk coast.

Lying happily on a red plaid rug set on bumpy grass, the sandwiches and bottles of lemonade sustained us. There were no disposable barbecues, beer chillers or, as the



19th-century Pic Nic Society expected, six bottles of wine a head.

It seems strange to us now but picnics were originally held indoors. All those invited were expected to bring food or contribute to the cost. The Victorian middle classes then discovered the genteel pleasure of eating outdoors, and the classic Fortnum & Mason logo started to appear on the

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wicker baskets of many well-heeled country visitors.

The simple pigeon pie, cold lamb and strawberries of Jane Austen's Emma developed into Mrs Beeton's lavish suggestions of cold roast meats and game, lobster, calf's head, fruit pies, blancmanges in moulds and jam puffs.

To me, picnics seem to have become simpler. I remember packing with delight a small wicker hamper to go to my first Henley Royal Regatta, planning which foods would transport well. I could not afford lobster so made small wholemeal-pastry crab quiches.

Now that the seasonal events that are so much part of an English summer have been mothballed for this year, why not take advantage of the extra spare time, the weather and the peace and quiet and have a picnic outside in the sun, with a dressed crab and a bottle or so of wine?

PICTURE: SHUTTERSTOCH