



Sally's Galley

By Sally Oulton

Moreton Bay and Balmain Bugs – Uniquely Australian

I have to say with all those years away spent overseas, I missed our unique Australian Moreton Bay or Balmain Bugs. Trying to explain to someone who had never been to Australia what a “bug” is and how delicious they are, wasn't easy! I often wished I could have popped down to a local market and picked some up for the boss's lunch, just so he/she could try our delicious bugs.

The nearest thing I ever found that was as sweet, as meaty and as flavoursome as our bugs, were Langoustine, also known as a Dublin Bay prawn, scampi or a Norway lobster. They weren't as big as a bug and were more like a prawn. I first tasted these little delicacies fished from the Adriatic Sea along the Croatian seaboard. They are slim orange-pink lobsters that grow up to 24cm long and I'd cooked them up the same way as I would cook a bug.

Moreton Bay Bugs and Balmain Bugs are similar and often mistaken for one or the other. Moreton Bay Bugs are generally found in Australia's northern waters from Shark Bay, WA around the northern coast of Australia down to the north

coast of NSW. Most of the commercial catch is caught as a by-catch of local prawn fisheries with dredge nets. They are highly prized and very popular in restaurants.

Balmain Bugs are found down the southern half of Australia from Geraldton around to Fraser Island and are mainly commercially caught along the New South Wales seaboard. Both types of bugs live on muddy or sandy bottoms in inshore coastal waters usually in depths from ten to sixty-five metres and bury themselves during the day and become active at night.

Differentiating between the two



bugs is typically via two ways. Moreton Bay bugs are bigger and generally weigh between 120-380g, and can grow up to 11.5cm. Balmain bugs are smaller usually weighing between 80-200g and grow between 10-14cm. The second way is by looking at the location of the eyes. Moreton Bay bugs have their eyes set towards the edge of the head, while Balmain bugs have them set

towards the middle of the head.

Bugs are available all year frozen, either whole or as tails only. Most of the time I have found bugs to be served cold on a platter along with prawns, oysters and a seafood sauce. This is lovely but I think the ultimate, most delectable way to have bugs is to buy them green, cut them in half and cook them up on the barbeque on a pleasant Saturday afternoon either at home, at the beach or on board your boat. The bonus is that it will only take you five to ten minutes to cook.

If you live in a coastal city you may be able to get live bugs at your local

fish market. If you live in a regional centre this may be found at the local marinas or wharves where the trawlers dock or bugs may be found at your local fish shop. If live ones are available buy those that are liveliest and whose tails are still snapping. Avoid the ones that are sluggish. I suggest you chill them in the refrigerator or freezer to put to sleep before boiling them or if you wish to prepare a dish for which raw bug

meat is required, quickly dip the bugs in and out of boiling water to kill them.

If there are no live ones, ask your fishmonger if he/she has any green ones. Most bugs are frozen at sea because bugs are very perishable. I buy mine in bags of six or eight already frozen. They may cost a bit but I look at them as a special treat for a lovely dinner with my partner or



It is always hard to believe that for many years, the 'bug' was considered a nuisance for serious professional prawners, as there was simply no demand for them at the fish markets. How times have changed! Today, the delicate flavour is often preferred by many seafood *afficionados* over alternatives such as crayfish, or the various varieties of prawns.



for when we have some friends over for a barbeque on the deck. Store frozen bugs in plastic bags in a separate freezer compartment and use within a month. Lay them out on a tray and let them defrost for a few hours in the fridge. Wash them and then cook them.

Cutting them in half and cooking them on the barbeque is a lovely way to present them on a plate. You will need a sturdy, sharp knife to cut them down the centre. The intestinal thread that runs down the centre of the tail must be removed. You will easily see this once you cut your bugs in half. You will also need to carefully clear away the head matter and brush the meat with extra virgin olive oil. I like to mix my olive oil with some freshly crushed garlic and let the bugs marinate for an hour or so. Heat up the barbeque and cook them face down for 5-8 minutes depending on their size, until the shells are a brilliant red.

Another delicious way to have them is to shell them. Turn the bug belly up so that the shell is facing down. With kitchen scissors, cut along each side of the softer underbelly skin. Peel the skin back and pull the meat away from the hard shell. The intestinal thread should come away with the shell and you will be left with a lovely, meaty piece



Editor's Note: 36 yr old Sally Oulton was born in Perth, did a stint in NZ for five years, before settling in Dubbo, NSW where she grew up with her family. Leaving Oz in 1994, she travelled to Europe, did the secretarial thing for three years - and then changed course to study cooking in 1997. After her first cooking assignment (in the '97 Admiral's Cup) she spent the next ten years at sea - all over the world - in an extraordinary career that has so far embraced 60,000 miles at sea in everything from crack ocean racing yachts in Europe and South America, 'white yachts' in the Med, Caribbean and the Whitsundays - to Oz game boats off the Ribbons. Now back home, with her partner and a 19' Haines, they plan to explore the GBR via trailerboat.

of shellfish. Also marinate in some extra virgin olive oil and some freshly crushed garlic for a few hours. You can take frozen bugs with you out in the boat in your esky or fridge. Let them defrost and then grill them over your boat barbeque/stove, or over a campfire on the beach or along the river.

While up in the Whitsunday's last year I found bug tails sold in frozen packs in a fish market in Bowen. I couldn't believe I didn't have to do the work cutting them open. Bugs

this way are more economical (but less fun) as much of the weight is in the inedible head.

As with all crustaceans, do not cook bugs if you have bought them cooked. (i.e the shell is already red). I've heard of people doing this. You wouldn't cook a prawn that has already been cooked so don't do it with bugs. Re-cooking a bug will only destroy the already cooked meat and dry it out and you are not getting the full flavour of the bug. If the fishmonger doesn't have any green ones, ask him/her to find some for you.

I can't stress it enough but do invest in a good quality extra virgin olive oil. It does make a difference in taste and use your good quality oil for salad dressing and marinating, not for cooking. Reserve plain light colour olive oil for cooking.

You can cook the meat in so many different ways while you're away in your boat. Pan-fry and serve with a tomato-based pasta sauce, or grill and put into a salad with some Asian flavours. Or simply served grilled bugs with a lovely fresh salsa and a lovely glass of Australian Chardonnay.

Bon Appetit & Happy Bug Cooking!



Recipe: Bugs with Mango & Avocado Salsa

Either cut in half or shell bugs and marinate in some extra virgin olive oil and crushed garlic. Salsa – dice a mango, an avocado, a small red onion, a tomato and some chopped coriander. Mix all together and put into the fridge or esky until ready to eat. Include a diced chilli if you would enjoy your salsa a little spicy.

Make sure your grill is clean and hot. Cook bugs in their shells for 4-10 minutes, depending on size. Shelled bugs cook for 2-5 minutes only.
- Sally