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WRITER

MENU

The Chesapeake's Cornucopia

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PROSE



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In Baltimore, there are five seasons: winter, spring, summer, autumn, and tailgating season, that gap between crunchy russet leaves and ice-tipped blades of parched grass.

It is tailgating season in Baltimore and for our family, that means more than Thanksgiving or Christmas or weddings or college graduations. It means extensive lists and shopping trips and ticket distribution, and the annual tune-up of our tailgate van, which only ever travels from my father's house to the football stadium, and back, on Sundays. On Saturdays, he takes her for a test drive around the neighborhood—a superstitious errand, more about calming his pregame nerves than checking her rusty brakes. She is painted a base coat of black underneath a gloss speckled with violet metallic flakes that cast a glittery shadow when the sun catches them just right. Her license plate reads simply: GAMEDAY. Her inner floor is carpeted with an emerald-green Astroturf, and the long, crackling leather seats are positioned around the sides, where the tailgaters will huddle and sit atop one another's laps, allowing more space for the critical gear.

The equipment is stacked in the center—the grill, the plastic bins of organized supplies, the propane tank, the steamer pot large enough to hold a twelve-pound turkey. The propane tank is technically not permitted as a passenger in the van as we travel through the tunnel that parts the waters of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. The tunnel's drab tiles are dimly lit with the yellowed glow of scattered bulbs, but we lean forward to block the propane tank's view from the tollbooth operator before slipping inside the tunnel's berth.

We emerge from the tunnel and arrive at precisely nine o'clock, the moment the parking lot attendants check their wristwatches and shuffle forward to slide the heavy wooden gate from the lot's entrance. Our arrival is meticulously timed, as always, and we flash our parking pass as we pull forward. My father eases the van into her regular spot between the chalky white lines. My Uncle Jack hops out of the front passenger seat and opens the double doors along the side of the van.

We all pile out, each taking Jack's hand as we navigate around the piles of tailgate gear, jumping out the side like obedient soldiers in a line. We carry the items out of the van with assembly-line precision: the grill is a two-person job, followed by the folding tables, the chairs we never sit in, and the foil-covered aluminum tins of food. We set into motion—Jack and my cousin unfolding the tables and snapping the locking mechanisms into place. My mother and I determine the order of the food offerings on the tables—appetizers first on the left, followed by main dishes and sides, then dessert. My father warms up the grill and positions the steamer pot and propane tank a safe distance from the van. We each have our setup duties.

Except Adam. Adam always steps aside, tugging a small glass bottle of whiskey out of his cargo pants pocket. We know he has nerves like my father, and an affinity for the taste of Old Grand-Dad on Sunday mornings.

The setup is simpler today, mostly appetizers resting on chafing dishes above warming flames. The table that holds the appetizers is adorned with a homemade tablecloth stitched by my mother's arthritic hands—a deep purple cotton spotted with the Baltimore Ravens' black-winged emblem.

The other table, the longest one, we cover with brown paper, recognizable to anyone from Baltimore as crab-picking paper. We have a theme for each game's menu—Philly cheesesteaks and soft pretzels when we play the Eagles, an Oktoberfest tailgate with bratwursts and German potato salad, and a full Thanksgiving spread in November, complete with turkeys and stuffings and pies.

Today we are having our once-a-year seafood steamer feast. We always reserve the seafood tailgate for the coldest gameday of the year. This is that day. The temperature will dip low, and the clouds will shield the sun from providing any warmth. We have all checked the forecast daily leading up to Sunday, hoping for a shift, a reprieve that isn't offered. It's going to be a brutal day to spend outside. We have all dressed in layers—long johns and leggings under jeans or snow pants; thick socks and single-use heating packets stuffed into our boots; hats and scarves, mittens and earmuffs.

The four hours pass by slowly, filled with the same patterns, Sunday after Sunday. My mother always seeks out the mobile lottery booth, buys too many twenty-dollar-a-pop scratch-off tickets, squeals with a winner's joy when one of them yields a ten-dollar prize. My father is always the grillmaster, donning a black apron that reads Real Men Fry Turkeys, a set of metal tongs ever-present in his right hand. We each have a wine glass, custom etched with our names, that we pull from a large bin in the back of the van and sip from for those four hours, returning the lip-stained rims and stems to the bin for my mother to wash later. Every week, a homeless man approaches timidly, and each time my father slips him a twenty and a plate heaped with food. I wonder if he looks forward to the seafood tailgate each season like we do.

The seafood steams in the pot as we sip our wine and snack on grilled tuna steaks with my father's special wasabi sauce mixture. Dad has carefully layered the shells—the clams, mussels, and crab legs—between rows of corn on the cob and sliced onions. And

throughout the pot, the Old Bay Seasoning blend is sprinkled evenly. Its layers are as carefully thought out as my Italian great-grandmother's lasagna, and its seasoning is the secret sauce no one can seem to replicate. We talk and sip and rub our gloved hands together for warmth as we watch the needle on the pot lid tick upward. My father never walks more than a few feet away from the pot, keeping an eye on it as he tends to the grill and his family. And then finally, he declares it is ready.

He trades his wool gloves for rubber ones designed to protect his machinist hands from the heat of the metal handles on the pot. He lifts the large pot from its base, and we all take a few steps back as he hefts it over the table, tilts it downward, and lets the contents spill over the brown-papered table: the Chesapeake Bay's cornucopia.

The heat of the mollusks' shells meets the bitter cold winter air and swirls tiny tornadoes of steam upward, covering the air above the table like a fog. My father, the only one of us on the far side of the table, is blurred from our view by the Old Bay-scented vapors but still we know he is grinning as the aroma travels across the parking lot, lifting noses of nearby tailgaters and forcing them to turn their rosy cheeks in our direction.

I stand ready with a fistful of forks at the head of the table, and one by one, the tailgaters take their utensils from me and circle up around the table. One fork is all we need—we remove our gloves and mittens and warm our hands instead with the shells of the clams and mussels and crab legs. At a nice seafood restaurant in Baltimore, we might use a delicate crab knife or a wooden mallet, but here we tear into our pile of shelled sea edibles with our bare fingers. We let our hands do the breaking and pulling, and then scoop out our treasure with the forks. There are bowls of butter that have been warmed on the grill, and we dip our morsels in and out of the creamy butter melt before settling them onto our lips.

The reddish-brown seasoning will creep under our fingernails and remain there throughout the game, wafting that familiar smell throughout the stadium's stands as we clap and roar with excitement. The satisfying crack of the exoskeleton releases a stream of salt-tinged heat into our faces, and the soft meat melts into our tongues.

It's tailgating season in Baltimore, and yes, there is a game today, but this—this is what we came for.

Over the years, we will all change; the bodies we are residing in will change. My father's beard will turn from black to gray to white, but the Old Bay will still cling to its wiry hairs just the same. There will be years where the bay is dried up of crabs, and we import king crab claws to take its place, and then other years when the bay's harvest is plentiful again, like the neighbor who can't give away all his garden-grown cucumbers in late summer.

I will quit eating meat, and our menu will start including more vegetarian and pescatarian options—mushroom caps stuffed with blends of cheese, jalapeño poppers, and oysters. I will have a baby, after a season of avoiding the seared tuna, still pink in the middle, and overindulging in the cakes and pies toward the end of the tailgate. I won't come to as many games after my daughter is born, even though I said I would pre-motherhood, choosing peekaboo and drool-covered bibs over a day away from the miniature version of me.

My mother will die, unexpectedly, and we will go on using her handmade tablecloth and plastic utensil caddies. Her etched wine glass will stay in the bin, and we will still buy scratch-off tickets from the mobile lottery stand for her, taking turns rubbing the filmy surface off with quarters, and celebrating her small wins.

My uncle's embrace will morph from a jolly squeeze to a longer, more comforting reassurance. My father will start reaching for my hand as we enter the stadium, and I will clutch his back in solidarity.

We will change, but this—this will remain constant. We will still gather here, around this table and feast, letting the salty steam swathe us in an immersion of nostalgia and a kinship of all those years passed, all those times we warmed each other with clams, and whiskey, and knowing looks.

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