

THE



SUN



SECURING THE LINE

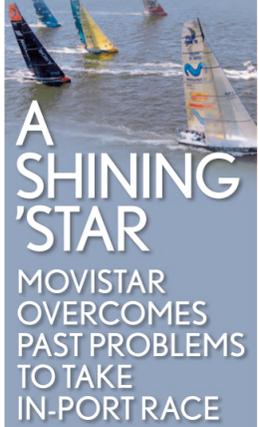
RAVENS TRADE UP FOR OREGON NOSE TACKLE NGATA >>>SPORTS

SUNDAY EDITION

NFL DRAFT TOP 10

1. HOUSTON
Mario Williams, DE (N.C. State)
 2. NEW ORLEANS
Reggie Bush, RB (USC)
 3. TENNESSEE
Vince Young, QB (Texas)
 4. N.Y. JETS
D'Brickshaw Ferguson, OT (Virginia)
 5. GREEN BAY
A.J. Hawk, LB (Ohio State)
 6. SAN FRANCISCO
Vernon Davis, TE (Maryland) **More, 12D**
 7. OAKLAND
Michael Huff, DB (Texas)
 8. BUFFALO
Donte Whitner, DB (Ohio State)
 9. DETROIT
Ernie Sims, LB (Florida State)
 10. ARIZONA
Matt Leinart, QB (USC)
- >>> COVERAGE, PGS 1D, 10-12D

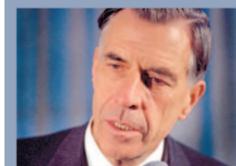
VOLVO OCEAN RACE



A SHINING STAR

MOVISTAR OVERCOMES PAST PROBLEMS TO TAKE IN-PORT RACE

>>> MARYLAND



J. KENNETH GALBRAITH DIES AT 97

>>> PG 4A

HOME OFFICE

TINY KESWICK HAS BECOME A MAGNET FOR ENTREPRENEURS

>>> BUSINESS

FIRST DATES

HOW TO LEAVE A COMPANION WANTING MORE

>>> MODERN LIFE

HEAVY TOLL OF DRIVING

ADDRESSING AN EPIDEMIC OF CARNAGE ON U.S. ROADS

>>> IDEAS

A SUN SPECIAL REPORT PART ONE OF TWO

With the bay in decline,
Asian fisheries rise —
catching, picking, packaging
Maryland's signature food



CRAB FACTORY

Article BY GADY A. EPSTEIN AND STEPHANIE DESMON [SUN REPORTERS]
Photographs BY CHIAKI KAWAJIRI [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]



A Thai boat brings a catch of blue swimming crabs to the Donsak pier. The crustacean, at top, is similar in taste and texture to Maryland's blue crab.

By 9 a.m. the crab boats have already been coming and going from the pier for close to five hours, with migrant Burmese workers laboring to unload, sort, weigh and steam crabs that are destined for dinner plates on the other side of the world.

DONSAK, THAILAND

Presiding over this assembly line are Nantanee and Somsak Choeyklin, who remember when this crustacean that made them rich was only junk and they were poor. The blue swimming crab, known in Thailand as "horse crab," mottled and bluish-green, was little more than subsistence food when their parents were fishermen.

"When I was young, horse crab was worthless," Nantanee Choeyklin says. "We'd trade the horse crab for coconuts or some other fruit."

"Sometimes," her husband says, "we'd get it and just throw it back."

But this sea creature turned out to be strikingly similar to a classic American delicacy, Maryland's blue crab. The bad fortunes of the slowly disappearing Chesapeake Bay variety — its population in decline for more than 20 years, now holding steady near historic lows — created an opening for this previously unappreciated species 9,000 miles away.

A Maryland crab institution, the Phillips restaurants family, found that opening, discovering treasure where others had not. Led by Steve Phillips, Phillips Foods has in the past 15 years turned a foreign blue crab into a nearly \$300 million-a-year industry, just as the industry back home was struggling. In the same stroke, Phillips Foods upended the equation of supply and demand in small fishing villages across the region, crowning an unloved crab as king.

Ask the Choeyklins what they think of "horse crab" now, and Somsak Choeyklin raises up his arms — his left wrist adorned by a diamond- [Please see CRAB, 12A]



In a light drizzle, Wichien Eitsri, 29, works with crab traps in Trang, where a Thai government program is encouraging crab farming. [Article, Page 14A]

>>> ONLINE For photo galleries, podcasts and archived coverage of Maryland's crab industry, go to baltimoresun.com/mdcrabs

Cutting back on fuel consumption could be the key to combating rising prices, but will Americans do it?

Taking the foot off the gas

BY PAUL ADAMS [SUN REPORTER]

They've grumbled, cursed and called for price-gouging investigations. But there's one thing that Americans have scarcely ever done when rising gas prices make front-page news. Use less gas.

"I like to call my generation the

most hypocritical generation ever," said Robert Kaufmann, a professor in the Center for Energy and Environmental Studies at Boston University.

"We came of age when oil was getting very expensive, and we swore we'd never drive the big, ugly cars like our parents, and we've just become a lot worse than our parents ever could have imagined."

Gasoline consumption has climbed from about 6 million barrels a day in the early 1970s to an average of 9.1 million barrels a day last year — an upward march that has had little correlation to price.

The only break in the pattern came in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Arab oil embargo, long gas lines and a recession [Please see GAS, 9A]

INSIDE

WEATHER MOSTLY SUNNY

High, 67; low, 40. Dry and cooler conditions are expected over the next few days. Yesterday's downtown high, 65; low, 49.

>>> PG 8B



Perfect storm, awful floods

New models show 20-ft. surge possible, far above Isabel's

BY FRANK D. ROYLANCE [SUN REPORTER]

Three years ago this September, a storm surge driven by winds from a weakening Hurricane Isabel produced the worst Chesapeake Bay flooding in 70 years.

Waters up to 8 feet above normal tides surged into lower Fells Point and across Pratt and Light streets into downtown Baltimore. Hundreds of basements and businesses flooded.

Hundreds of homes in Bowleys Quarters and elsewhere on the bay shore were badly damaged or destroyed. Property damage reached \$410 million in Maryland alone.

But as destructive as Isabel was, recent computer simulations by government scientists — the most extensive ever for the Chesapeake Bay — show that hurricane storm surges here could get much, much worse.

Under some conditions, they discovered, a Category 4 hurricane making landfall in the Carolinas could produce storm surges as high as 18 or 20 feet in Baltimore at high tide. That's at least 10 feet — a full story — above Isabel's high-water mark and enough to carry floodwaters much farther inland.

The storms were simulated on the latest version of the government's computerized SLOSH model. The name is an acronym for "Sea, Lake and Overland Surges from Hurricanes." [Please see STORMS, 10A]

>>> AMBROSE Assess your flood insurance needs. PG 1C

Pressures from new houses hit schools

Plans OK'd despite Balto. County law

BY JOSH MITCHELL [SUN REPORTER]

Just beyond the playground at Chapel Hill Elementary School, a bulldozer sits among dirt lots that will soon be dotted with single-family homes. Across the street, contractors hammer away on the last of more than 60 houses built on an old farm. Up the road, a sign advertises "36 beautiful two-car garage villas."

The new homes in eastern Baltimore County will be served by Chapel Hill Elementary, where pupils are projected to outnumber lockers next fall and two trailers are being installed to relieve the building's crowded classrooms.

"If you looked at the number of developments still being developed over the area, Chapel Hill's just going to pop a gasket," said Michael Gaffney, whose daughter, Shannon, attends first grade at the school. "Would they continue to issue building permits if there wasn't enough water or enough electricity?" [Please see CROWDING, 16A]

SPECIAL REPORT // CRAB FACTORY

The machinery of globalization



Workers at the Donsak pier sort blue swimming crabs into laundry baskets as a crab boat drops off its catch. Each worker will earn at most a few cents per pound of crab.

CRAB [From Page 1A]

encrusted gold Rolex that matches his wife's; his right wrist encircled by a solid-gold chain inscribed with a Superman-style S — and he declares triumphantly, "The horse crab is god!"

Sitting comfortably in plastic chairs on the pier, the air calm but strong with the odor of crab, they are at the center of a changed world. Nantanea Choeyklin is now mayor of Donsak, she and Somsak are wealthy, and what was once a small-time operation has become one of the town's largest employers, buying and selling crab that ends up in the United States.

The machinery of globalization has done its work, remaking Maryland's signature food into an industrialized product, processed and branded as carefully as a Nike basketball shoe. Crabmeat has become outsourced and commoditized, transformed from a Chesapeake Bay specialty into a manufactured good.

A new breed of crab industrialists — ambitious, opportunistic and well-capitalized — has fueled and profited from this boom. These new entrepreneurs have left behind an old breed of crabbers and pickers, the men and women of the Chesapeake Bay, who can't compete.

The influx of this crabmeat has made it possible to find Maryland's famous dish — the crab cake — in dive bars and white-tablecloth restaurants from Maine to New Mexico, except now the Chesapeake region's specialty is made mostly from Asian crab.

As in the past, with goods such as T-shirts and toys, few consumers seem to notice or care that their food is no longer from the United States. "Maryland crab" is simply rebranded "Maryland-style crab," and casual diners might be hard-pressed to notice a difference in taste.

The upside is this: The American consumer has wider access to a cheaper product. It's possible because an overseas army of fishermen, dockworkers and crab pickers labors long hours at low wages, some of them happily so, but some of them not. Before crabmeat lands on an American dinner plate, dozens of workers have handled it, from pulling it out of the sea in its shell to putting it on a shelf in its can.

In Donsak, migrant workers indenture them-

selves to a life of long hours, little sleep and even less leisure for, perhaps, just enough money to make life better back home — the seafood industry's version of factory towns. Local factory bosses such as the Choeyklins, and the U.S. companies they serve, reap the substantial profits to be made from mass production at low cost.

But as the people of the Chesapeake Bay learned, the boom can last only as long as the natural resource does. Before it becomes processed into an Asian factory product, *Portunus pelagicus* is a living thing, part of a delicate ecosystem that is increasingly vulnerable to the voracious appetites of globalization.

In the past decade, competition for crab has greatly increased as other companies have followed Phillips into Thailand's fishing villages. Amid rising prices and a declining harvest, Phillips all but pulled out of Thailand last year, looking to cheaper markets such as China and Vietnam to find the Asian blue crab it needs. The machine of globalization rolls on in its ceaseless search for more abundant, cheaper labor and resources.

Floating uneasily above the crab's natural habitat is the fisherman on a skiff powered by an old car engine, overtaken by larger commercial fishing vessels and trawlers that might be plundering his future, depleting the Thai crab like the Maryland crab before it. The watermen and pickers of Thailand may one day learn the same hard lesson of their counterparts in the Chesapeake Bay: In the ecosystem of globalization, they are near the bottom of the food chain.

Time was, the J.M. Clayton Co. of Cambridge was on top. A picking and packing business near the Chesapeake Bay, Clayton was, from not long after its founding

STEVE PHILLIPS CEO, Phillips Foods

Age: 59

Residence: Annapolis

Personal: Married to the former Maxine Prevatt; four children

Background: Grew up on Maryland's Eastern Shore, near family's crab picking business on Hooper's Island, and later lived near family's restaurant in Ocean City. Earned bachelor's degree in business from University of Miami, then returned to Maryland to help run family business. Oversaw expansion of restaurant chain and food business. Spearheaded imports of foreign crabmeat.

Of note: In 2002, Phillips Foods moved its headquarters into a former Coca-Cola bottling plant in Locust Point.



THE PHILLIPS FOODS STORY

1956: Brice and Shirley Phillips open carryout restaurant in Ocean City called Phillips Crab House.

1980: Phillips Harborplace restaurant opens in Baltimore; becomes one of the dozen top-grossing restaurants in the country.

1990: Brice and Shirley Phillips' son Steve opens first crab processing plant in Southeast Asia, in the Philippines. Phillips Foods is founded, a business now making products from crab cakes to crab soups, and working as an outlet for much of the crab being harvested by the company.

Today: A dozen Phillips restaurants operate in the United States, and Phillips Foods runs crab processing operations in nine countries.

Source: Phillips Foods

in 1890, a full-service cannery — crabs, fish, oysters, even bullfrogs. One by one, though, economics whittled its inventory. Little more than crab remained.

The Clayton operation is in every sense a hold-over, one of the last pieces of a culture that was dominated by those who worked the water. The three brothers who run the company established by their great-grandfather share a dingy, dark-paneled office along the Choptank River. Cubicles are created using metal dividers and furnished with bare metal desks and uncomfortable chairs. The quaint old building sits on prime waterfront property. Real estate development is the one true growth industry in Cambridge. Developers are putting up condominiums. No one is constructing new crab plants.

Other food industries saw major technological advances in the past century. Fresh vegetables gave way to frozen. Chickens began to be sold to the masses as boneless, skinless breasts. But Eastern Shore crab processors largely kept their traditional ways. The only revolution came in the 1950s with the introduction of high-heat pasteurization, which granted crabmeat a shelf life longer than a week.

Most of the work still had to be done by hand — lots of hands that performed the painstaking process of extracting meat from each steamed blue crab.

The only variable was the raw material: the erratic harvests of the Chesapeake Bay blue crab.

Clayton could get only what the watermen could catch. Not one claw more. The business was limited by what the bay provided.

It was a formula that worked for nearly 100 years. Then nature began letting the processors down.

Phillips restaurants bought from Clayton occasionally as well as from other Maryland processors, some of which are no longer in business. All of Phillips' crab used to be domestic crab.

The Phillips restaurant chain began in 1956 with a tiny Ocean City carryout that opened on Memorial Day and closed on Labor Day. It was a time when crab season meant too much crab. Steve Phillips' parents, Brice and Shirley, needed a place to sell surplus crabmeat from the family's Hooper's Island packing plant.

The carryout became a restaurant. The restaur-

ant took off and then grew into a chain. The opening of an Inner Harbor location in 1980 and one in Washington in 1985 reinforced the need for a year-round supply of crab. By the end of the 1980s, 65 percent of the items on Phillips menus were made with crab — and the bay was no longer providing what the company needed. Neither were other states down the coast and along the Gulf of Mexico.

A search for more led Steve Phillips on a journey that he hoped would allow his family's restaurant business to thrive. His explorations turned into something else. He would ultimately reinvent — and greatly enlarge — an entire industry. The crabs on his menus, he realized, didn't have to come from the United States. They could be caught, steamed, picked and pasteurized in Asia in far larger quantities than they had ever been in the Chesapeake Bay. The virtual monopoly held by U.S. crab processors began to dissolve.

Turning to Asia, Steve Phillips built what would become an international company — Phillips Foods — that had revenues of \$148 million last year and employed nearly 7,000 workers across the globe. Last year, Phillips imported 14 million pounds of crabmeat — six times what the state of Maryland produced. The company made 13 million crab cakes at its Locust Point headquarters, many following Shirley Phillips' nearly 50-year-old recipe.

This invasion of Asian crab has meant that Phillips restaurants, which now number a dozen, would never have to worry about running out of crab. But there was soon a new wrinkle. The company was bringing in so much crab, Phillips needed to find new ways to sell it.

It wasn't as simple as announcing that Phillips had crab for sale. Executives had to persuade people who had never before eaten crab — or who had tried it once on a trip to Baltimore — to ask for it back home in Arizona or Nebraska or Utah.

They also had to persuade chefs to cook new dishes with a new product. The marketing became a chef-to-chef campaign. Soon, the company was aggressively promoting a full line of dishes dependent on crab. There were chicken stuffed with crab, crab and spinach dip, crab pizza, crab pretzels, even something called a jalapeno crab slammer. This proliferation of Phillips' products is sold in grocery stores nationwide, in Roy Rogers fast-food restaurants and at Costco wholesale stores, something that never would have been possible without the develop-

[Please see CRAB, 13A]



Kosoom Nakworapong's 18-month-old son, Veeraputt "Bol" Leemai, tries to help as she works with crab netting in Ranong on Thailand's west coast. The 32-year-old woman's husband supplied crabs for Phillips Foods before it temporarily left the country last year.



Atlantic blue crab

Latin name: *Callinectes sapidus* (savory beautiful swimmer)
Life span: Average is 2 to 3 years; would probably be years longer if not fished out. Reaches maturity at 12 to 18 months.
Description: Drab olive green body set off by brilliant blue claws. Female claws are tinged with red.
Average size and weight: Between 5.5 and 6.5 inches across the width of the shell. A six-inch male weighs about a half-pound; females are lighter.
Range of habitat: Western Atlantic Ocean from Nova Scotia to Argentina; majority south of Cape Cod, Mass. Also Gulf of Mexico.

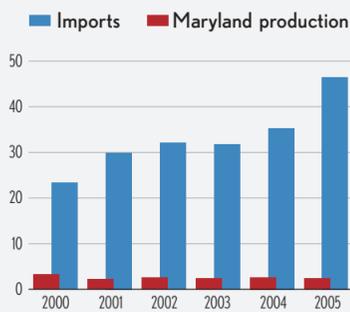


Blue swimming crab

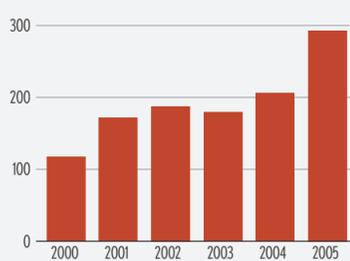
Latin name: *Portunus pelagicus*
Life span: Average is 2.6 years, but can live 3 to 4 years. Reaches maturity after 8 months.
Description: Mottled, bluish-green
Average size and weight: Male crab is 5.8 inches; weighs about two-thirds to three-quarter pound. Female is 5.6 inches; weighs slightly less. Thinner shell than *Callinectes sapidus*, giving it a higher ratio of meat to shell.
Range of habitat: The waters of Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Also northwestern Pacific near Japan, Korea, China and Taiwan. Also the Red Sea and the waters off Australia and East Africa.



Imports of blue swimming crab into the United States compared with Maryland blue crab harvests from 2000 to 2005, in millions of pounds



Value of imports of blue swimming crab into the United States from 2000 to 2005, in millions of dollars



These nations sent the most crabmeat to the United States in 2005, in millions of dollars



Sources: Morgan State University, Rajamangala Institute of Technology, The Thailand Research Fund, National Marine Fisheries Service, Maryland Sea Grant Extension, U.S. Food and Drug Administration

CRAB [From Page 12A]

ment of the Asian fisheries. "When crab was a local product, there wasn't enough of it to make it a national seafood item," said John Sackton, president of Seafood.com, an industry news service.

Ten years ago, the domestic crabmeat industry made up 76 percent of the blue crab supply in the United States. By 2004, U.S. processors were just 30 percent of the market, and the surge in Asian imports made up most of the difference. The dominance of imports is expected to only increase.

The increase so far has been staggering enough. In 2000, the first year the National Marine Fisheries Service began keeping statistics on what is called swimming crab — a category that comprises both the blue crab caught off parts of North and South America and the species caught in Southeast Asia — more than 23 million pounds, worth \$117 million, were imported into the United States.

In 2004, 35 million pounds were imported with a value of \$205 million. Last year, more than 46 million pounds of crabmeat, worth nearly \$300 million, entered the United States from abroad.

"We seem to be on the top end of the wave for crab cakes," said Art Nermoe, head of culinary research and development at Granite City Food & Brewery, a small Minnesota-based chain that serves a crab cake appetizer made with cheddar cheese. "Menu items go in cycles. Comfort food to avant-garde and back. Cyclically, things come and go. Seafood's hot."

Globalization sometimes means the merest whims of the world's wealthiest nation decide winners and losers. The proof of that is embedded in the peculiar and eminently expandable taxonomy of the American diet. When the Choeyklins started buying and selling seafood off the Donsak pier 15 years ago, they could not have known that one day they'd be making it possible for Americans to eat crab pizzas and crab-stuffed chickens.

Today the wharf neighborhood that surrounds their pier manifests the crab as commodity. The paved streets are less fishing village than factory town, with stretches of warehouse buildings where the company residents work and sleep, interspersed with small shops, sidewalk food stalls and bars where the workers and their families shop, eat, gamble and find a moment of respite. The emblematic figure is not a fisherman but a factory boss, in the towering form of Somsak Choeyklin. He plays the role with conviction, purposefully stalking the pier until he drives away in his SUV.

Before all this, before globalization, Somsak and Nantane Choeyklin were merely assuming the position of middleman in the local pecking order, which is roughly the same in any traditional fishing community that catches more than it can eat. Their money was made by buying the day's catch and then tacking on a small amount per kilogram as they sold it to local markets either fresh or frozen.

The sea provided enough to catch, the fishermen made a little money, the Choeyklins made a little more money, and together they fed their countrymen. With the significant exception of the shrimp industry, this fundamental domestic equilibrium had remained largely unchanged until the late 20th century. The blue swimming crab was abundant and inexpensive, perfect for local consumption.

Then Steve Phillips arrived, looking for blue crab. Phillips grew up catching crab and exploring the marshes of the Eastern Shore. He heard there was a crab out there similar to the one he had always caught in the Chesapeake Bay. But this one was halfway around the world, in the Philippines.

Phillips went to the Philippines on a shrimp-buying trip in the late 1980s and traveled to a remote island to discover whether the story was true. There, he found *Portunus pelagicus*. The blue swimming crab, as it is more commonly known in the United States, was similar in taste and texture to *Callinectes sapidus*, the savory Atlantic blue crab long eaten in the Chesapeake region but slowly disappearing. The Asian crab didn't taste as sweet, but it had beautiful, large white lumps of meat that made it a suitable substitute for a Maryland business in need.

In 1990, Phillips bought land in the Philippines and built his first Asian processing plant. He hired fishermen, bought them equipment and, the way a Phillips Foods corporate history puts it, taught them how to crab.

In 1994, Steve Phillips opened a plant in Indone-



"THE HORSE CRAB IS GOD!"

SOMSAK CHOYKLIN, ABOVE, WHO WITH HIS WIFE BECAME WEALTHY BUYING AND SELLING BLUE SWIMMING CRAB THAT IS EXPORTED TO THE U.S.

sia. In 1996, he opened one in Thailand. Today, the company says it has plants in nine countries — from India to Madagascar to Malaysia.

Phillips, 59, declined several requests by *The Sun* to discuss his Baltimore-based company, which is privately held, but interviews with Thai fishermen, crab pickers, middlemen and Phillips Foods' competitors make clear that when his company came to Thailand, it radically altered the equation of supply and demand.

Circumstance, timing and luck coincided to present the Choeyklins with a golden opportunity, but they also had to have the vision and daring to seize it. Steve Phillips was looking for middlemen who could reliably bring in a lot of blue swimming crab and who would be willing to change the way the crab was caught, cooked, handled and sold. The middlemen and their suppliers, the fishermen, would have to invest time and money to become processors in a global market.

It was a gamble not everyone was willing to take. What if Phillips decided later to leave for other countries? What if the consumer market for crab turned out not to be big enough to justify the expansion?

In Nantane Choeyklin, Phillips found a driven, ambitious businesswoman willing to take the risk. But as the principal owner of her business, she did have reservations. With a big new buyer like Phillips coming in, she told the company, crab wouldn't be so cheap anymore and Phillips might not be so eager to buy.

"The price will go up," she told the company. "Can you handle that?" When the answer came back yes, she decided to hitch her fortunes to those of Phillips Foods.

The gamble paid off handsomely. A modestly successful middleman in Thailand might buy and sell a few hundred pounds of crab a day. By the time

"WE JUST GOT OUTMUSCLED."

JACK BROOKS, BELOW, A MARYLAND CRAB PROCESSOR WHO LOST WHOLESAL CUSTOMERS WHO SWITCHED TO PHILLIPS FOODS' ASIAN CRABMEAT



In Khanom, a fishing town south of Donsak, blue swimming crabs are boiled, not steamed, for local consumption.

Phillips Foods temporarily left Thailand last year, the Choeyklins' little empire by the sea was taking in 5 tons of crabs daily, picking about 1.2 tons of crabmeat daily (4 pounds of crabs yield roughly 1 pound of crabmeat), and selling the meat to Phillips at about \$6 a pound.

Phillips had pushed the Choeyklins to modernize and expand the entire chain of production. At first, the crabs arrived at shore dead and red; Phillips wanted live, blue-hued crabs, fresh for steaming. So fishermen had to modify their boats to store crabs in plastic vats of seawater, oxygenated with air hoses.

To meet Phillips' demand for crab — and later other companies' demands as well — there also needed to be more boats; large crab boats and trawlers, once rare in the waters off Donsak, would number well into the hundreds by the end of the 1990s. Today, there are well over 1,000.

At Phillips' request, the Choeyklins also built a picking plant with interest-free loans and investments from Phillips in 2001. The Choeyklins eventually hired 120 full-time pickers. Phillips also asked them to upgrade the cleanliness of their site: Now all the pickers wear Phillips-issued uniforms, with hairnets, rubber gloves and rubber boots. They wash their hands in solutions of iodine instead of with soap, and they dip their boots in chlorine, not water, to disinfect.

"Every time there was a change, Phillips was the one who initiated it," Nantane Choeyklin said.

Phillips' success has inspired competition, with at least five other companies in Thailand sending crabmeat to the United States.

At the 2005 International Seafood Show in Boston, Ron Ratkels, who used to operate a crab plant in Louisiana but now works with an Asian seafood company, said he was taken aback by the number of different companies hawking crab — 28 were listed in the program as blue crab sellers. "I almost wanted to call it the Boston Crabmeat Show," he said.

"I used to be able to keep track of the labels on two hands," he said. "Now someone will name a label, and I haven't heard of it."

Crab consumption in the United States, meanwhile, has doubled in the past decade, according to the National Fisheries Institute, a trade association. Crabmeat has surpassed cod and clams as a favorite in the American diet. Shrimp is still No. 1, but crab is gaining.

As global demand for crab grew, back in Thailand the Choeyklins expanded their business and extended their local influence, using their cash and Phillips connection to consolidate control of the chain of production.

They owned a few of the boats on the water; and they had made, by their own estimate, about \$500,000 in loans to fishermen for boats and upgraded equipment. Whether the loans won the loyalty of fishermen or simply made them beholden, the Choeyklins built a guaranteed stable of crab suppliers in what was becoming a competitive market.

In 2000, Steve Phillips made what the Choeyklins said was his second visit to their pier. Their business was ascendant and prospering, Phillips was pleased, and they adjourned to a popular seafood restaurant for lunch.

On a roofed patio overlooking the water, the Choeyklins, Phillips and two of his executives dined on the crustacean that was making them all rich, *Portunus pelagicus*. Then, the Thai couple said, after tasting some of the white meat from a freshly cooked crab, Phillips told them, "The crabmeat from Thailand is the most delicious in the world."

If Southeast Asia is where the winners of globalization do their business, Maryland's Eastern Shore is home to players who lack the arsenal needed to play the same game.

Maryland's crab industry, once grateful to an ecosystem that helped the state reign as the blue crab capital of the world, is strayed by that same environment, now in decline. While seeing success after success overseas, the Shore has watched its own industry rapidly contract.

In 1997, there were 49 businesses in the state certified to pick crabs. Three years later, there were 35. Last year, there were 27, according to the Maryland Sea Grant Extension program.

It was about a decade ago, in the middle of summer — high season for crabs — when Jack Brooks noticed that orders for the Clayton company's crabmeat were drying up. It was the same product [Please see CRAB, 14A]

SPECIAL REPORT // CRAB FACTORY

Md. processors
all but giving up

CRAB [From Page 13A]

his great-grandfather started selling in 1890. But suddenly many of his regular wholesale customers weren't calling.

"People just stopped buying," Brooks recalled. They were buying Asian crabmeat from Phillips instead.

"Some of the customers were not being upfront. Others were saying, 'I've got to be honest, the stuff's cheaper. It's cheaper than yours,'" he said.

It was not much different from the classic manufacturing story of the late 20th century, just without as many headlines: Brooks and his domestic competitors were finding the market flooded with imports. Brooks said it wouldn't have been so bad if Phillips Foods had started selling its imported product in other parts of the country, but the company understandably focused its efforts where blue crab was already part of the food lexicon.

The local processors once set the price. Fewer crabs, higher price. A glut of crabs, cheap bushels for sale.

Now imports would be setting the price. "If someone else is selling, they're caught in a squeeze," said Bill Sieling, executive director of the Chesapeake Bay Seafood Industries Association. "There's a very narrow window in the industry. It's a struggle every day."

The loss of Maryland processors — and Shore jobs — has been a quiet, steady march for a decade.

"It hasn't been big news," Sieling said. "It wasn't like Beth Steel closing down or a big department store. It's been very gradual."

In 2000, a group of processors from Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas organized as the Blue Crab Coalition and took action. The processors had seen crawfish producers in Louisiana fight Chinese imports — and win. Federal trade officials placed tariffs on the imports, protecting do-

try was a result of falling crab harvests, not increased competition. The steep increase in demand for crabmeat in the United States, it ruled, proved there was room for both the domestic and foreign products.

That was six years ago. Many of Brooks' brethren have since gone out of business. One now drives a mail truck. Another sold his land to a developer. Another lobbied for the shrimp industry.

Janice Marshall is one of the casualties. The founder of a crab-picking cooperative on Smith Island, she now earns a regular paycheck at a state prison in Westover and picks only part time. "I'm a crab picker at heart," she said. "I'm a correctional officer by necessity."

The processors who remain have all but given up the fight. There is talk of campaigns to persuade people to buy local, there is special packaging in the works and there are brochures espousing the virtues of Maryland crab. But there's very little muscle — or money — behind it.

And, after years of trying to beat back the advance of foreign crabmeat, Clayton's Brooks is exploring an unlikely expansion — in Asia. One of the lead advocates for domestic crabmeat has decided to look overseas. His business could depend on it.

"Everyone likes to use the image of Maryland crabs and the watermen, but that doesn't put any money in [local] people's pockets," said Sieling, the industry association official. "They've got to sell something to make money."

Compared with the Chesapeake Bay, Southeast Asia's vast waters are home to a seemingly endless stock of crabs. But any one fishing spot that feeds the American appetite is in danger of drying up.

In 2001, the Choeyklins built a small crab hatchery at the pier, where breeding females are kept until they shed their fertilized eggs, an average of 500,000 each. The females are moved on to be steamed, but their eggs hatch and grow into tiny young crabs. Few will survive for long once they are released into the sea — the crab's life cycle is less a cycle than a brutal winnowing — and only some of those will grow large enough to become dinner like their mothers.

It is but one rudimentary effort to tilt the balance back in nature's favor: The industrialization of Thailand's blue swimming crab, only a decade old, may be threatening to destroy it.

"We noticed that the natural resource was declining, and we were trying to think of how to sustain it," Nantane Choeyklin said. "There's a decline of 50 percent in the crab due to more people fishing, using longer nets, bigger traps."

"There's going to be a crisis of scarcity of the crab. The swimming crab will be reduced greatly," said Vitaya Havanont, a government marine biologist working in Ranong, on Thailand's west coast, where villagers have subsisted on the swimming crab for generations.

Havanont describes an unsustainable chain reaction occurring in Thailand that is a textbook model of overaggressive fishing: An increase in the demand for crab drives the price up and draws more fishermen out to sea. That, in turn, increases the incentive to find ways to catch more crabs as quickly as possible, resulting in larger harvests.

As the sea's stock of crab decreases, the problem only gets worse. The price rises and the incentive grows to catch whatever remains, including breeders and small crabs that will never get a chance to breed. And if the price jumps too high, companies such as Phillips can get the same crabmeat cheaper in other countries until the same pattern repeats itself there, while the fishermen left behind look for other livelihoods.

Some in the crabbing industry contradict this scenario, arguing that measuring how much crab is caught — as Thai officials have done — does not accurately determine the actual stock of crabs in the sea. They say there are plenty of crabs left to catch.

The numbers so far seem to suggest otherwise. The annual harvest of blue swimming crab (mixed in with a small amount of another species of crab) has steadily declined from a peak of 51,500 tons in 1998 to roughly 32,000 tons last year, according to Thai government figures. During that time, the price of crab has as much as tripled, Thai fishermen and biologists say. But with increased competition at sea and smaller harvests, fishermen are catching so much less crab that they're making little more money.

"Ten years ago, the minimum was 20 kilograms of crab" — 44 pounds — "for this kind of net," Suthet Prabsamut said as he sat one morning on a thick tree branch on the beach of a small island village off the coast of Ranong. He is watching as relatives disentangle a morning's catch from 600 yards of crab net; today they will have little more than 25 pounds. "Back then the price was not as high, but the catch was plentiful."

Prabsamut's face appears much more worn than his 34 years. He said he earns at most \$150 a month, \$100 less than a decade ago. Some periods in the intervening years have been good; when Phillips Foods was buying crab caught by these fishermen, the price was going up and the catches were still sizable.

But Phillips stopped buying crab from this part of Thailand after the tsunami struck in December 2004, businessmen here said. The price of crab has dropped, the harvests remain smaller than they used to be, and the fishermen in this village of fewer than 150 people want their children to walk away from their ancestral profession. Prabsamut has a 7-year-old son.

"It's up to him, but I don't want him to be a crab fisherman because the future is not bright," Prabsamut said. For himself, he said, "the future



Jennifer Carroll cultivates algae mixed with minerals and vitamins to feed to crabs at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute in Baltimore. Below, a Maryland blue crab begins life at the institute's Center of Marine Biotechnology.

Helping nature

A Thai farming project aims to raise more crabs to sell as U.S. researchers look to replenish the bay's breeding stocks

BY GADY A. EPSTEIN [SUN FOREIGN REPORTER]

Working in a light drizzle at low tide, Wallop Suwanno clambers from his small boat onto the roof of a wooden tank just offshore, lowers a plastic bucket holding four egg-bearing female crabs and dumps them into the water.

The females, each carrying about a half-million fertilized eggs, have been spared for now so they can breed. Twenty-two small crabs have received a similar reprieve so they can grow larger in a neighboring tank.

All of these blue swimming crabs are to eventually end up being sold and eaten, but Suwanno and a fellow fisherman are willing to wait because of a Thai government program.

"It's a good thing to do to return something to nature," said Suwanno, 35, wearing a shirt that read on its back, in both Thai and English lettering, "Crab Project in Trang."

The fishing here used to go as nature dictated. When the tide was high enough, wives helped their husbands pull their boats into the water, the small wooden craft loaded with crab traps to reap what nature sows.

But the fishermen, worried about declining crab catches, are no longer leaving the harvests of blue swimming crab to nature alone. Government experts have encouraged these fishermen to become farmers as well, raising crabs in tanks, as if the crustaceans were domestic livestock.

If the fishermen succeed, it would also give hope to their counterparts in the Chesapeake Bay. Because unlike shrimp or salmon, most crab species have long been considered impossible to domesticate. They are feisty and cannibalistic, killing their own to survive in close quarters. They generally don't thrive by passively accepting food.

In Thailand, the goal is to raise more crabs to sell for consumption and to reverse a decline in the crab's population in Thai waters. In Baltimore, researchers at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute are focused on finding a way to replenish the Chesapeake Bay's vastly diminished breeding stocks. Steve Phillips — whose family's restaurant chain long ago turned to Asian crabmeat as the bay's production declined — has donated \$300,000 to the local project.

Jonathan Zohar, director of the institute's Center of Marine Biotechnology, said he is encouraged by the survival rates of homegrown blue crabs.

The Maryland blue crab and the Thai blue swimming crab are different species, but they exhibit a similar aggressive hunting instinct developed over millions of years. Confining them in farms would seem a challenge to evolution.

But Thailand, for many years the leading shrimp-farming country in the world, is determined to make blue crab farming work.

Marine biologists have created hatcheries to try to collect and release the roughly half-million eggs that each female spawns when breeding. In some test farms, biologists use mosses and seaweed along the seafloor so that young crabs can hide from combative neighbors. Scientists are also studying the blue swimming crab's DNA, in the hope of breeding the animal selectively to reduce its aggressiveness and increase its consumption of food pellets.

"We have to find some means to help the fishermen," said Banchong Tiensongrusmee, coordinator of a blue swimming crab program for the Thailand Research Fund.

It's unclear whether these steps will work,

TRANG, THAILAND



but without government intervention, fishing communities like this one in Trang face a difficult future.

At the end of a sandy road, hard by the water, the 120 people of this community live little better than past generations, in plank houses on stilts, with hot plates to cook meals and little or no furniture. Fishermen wake up according to an internal alarm clock, usually before dawn, to go out and catch crab.

They're catching less than in the past. On a recent day, the eight boats that went out returned with about 6 pounds of crabs each, a paltry catch. Thailand's total catch of blue swimming crabs had more than doubled in 13 years — because of an expanding local market and the new demand for exports — from less than 25,000 tons in 1985 to more than 50,000 tons in 1998, before the decline began.

One change for these fishermen is that if the catch includes a breeding female — her eggs bunched together in an orange-hued paste — that crab goes to the farm instead of a steamer. If the catch includes crabs too small to have much meat, they also go to the farm. Someone records the fisherman's name so he can reclaim an equal number of crabs in exchange. In return, the female crab is allowed to lay her eggs, and the young crabs are allowed to grow.

In the early stages of a blue swimming crab's life, man is kinder than nature. In the wild, an egg released from a female crab will hatch and the larva takes up to 30 days to move to a nursery ground, during which time it grows into an inch-sized crab. Of the half-million fertilized eggs a female may release, 99.98 percent of the offspring will die without reaching the nursery ground.

Government fisheries experts decided to raise the odds.

So the nursery in Trang includes a 4-square-yard tank, next to a second tank holding crabs still growing to adulthood. These tanks, which have been in use only since the beginning of this year, are part of a pilot program that Thai fisheries officials hope to expand to traditional fishing villages along the coast.

It's unclear whether the crab's darkly winnowing nature will return the favor. The crabs that hatch still face tough early days as they float from the tank. It takes time to develop the hard shell and adult size to survive in the sea — or, in these fishing waters, to be caught and cooked.

For the crabs being raised to grow larger, their tank has a soft sandy floor to burrow into to hide and protect themselves from peers and elders. Thai experts claim that 60 percent to 80 percent of crabs can survive in such farms.

That survival rate might be high enough to make a business out of farming the blue swimming crab. The idea remains in the testing stages in Thailand after three years, but Apirak Songrak, a fisheries expert in Trang province, says it is one of the few ways to ensure that the supply of crab continues.

"We can't tell the fishermen to stop fishing for blue swimming crab," he said.

Sun reporter Stephanie Desmon contributed to this article.



The workers at the Choeyklins' crab picking plant in Donsak wear Phillips-issued uniforms with hairnets, rubber gloves and rubber boots.

mestic crawfish against the cheap crustaceans from abroad.

Inspired by that success, Brooks and the others filed a petition with the U.S. International Trade Commission seeking tariffs on imports of blue swimming crab from Asia. Instead of facing off against a foreign nation, they were going head-to-head with a coalition of U.S.-based importers of Asian crabmeat — led by Steve Phillips of Baltimore's Phillips Foods.

Without intervention, the domestic processors argued in their 2000 petition, "the processing industry, the watermen, and the rural coastal culture will not survive."

If they won, the processors hoped to take the tariff money and finance a large marketing campaign to brand their crabmeat as a better-tasting product, following the lead of the beef industry's "Certified Angus Beef" labeling. The money was meant to match the millions Phillips Foods was believed to be spending on big-time marketing — something Phillips could afford, the domestic folks argued, because of its "lower labor costs and high profit margins."

The domestic processors lost.

"We just got outmuscled," Brooks said.

A majority of the trade commissioners sided with importers because, as the commission wrote, any injury being done to the crab indus-

ABOUT THE SERIES



DESMON

Stephanie Desmon and Gady A. Epstein began their reporting for this series in 2005. Desmon, a member of *The Sun's* state staff,

reported from the Eastern Shore, Washington and Minneapolis, Minn., as well as Baltimore. Epstein, former Beijing correspondent for *The Sun*, reported in Thailand. Staff photographer Chiaki Kawajiri worked alongside both reporters, in Southeast Asia as well as the United States.



EPSTEIN



KAWAJIRI

is just to keep going. I have no alternative job. But it won't be very prosperous. It will be just surviving."

It's a story already being told on the Chesapeake Bay, though maybe not for long. The blue crab fishery remains the largest commercial fishery on the bay, with a 2005 dockside value of \$32.7 million in Maryland alone, but it's the only significant fishery left. Gone, or almost gone, are the sturgeon, the rockfish, the shad. Oysters carry just a fraction of the economic weight they once did.

"The sturgeon was the first fish overfished in the Chesapeake Bay," said William J. Goldsborough, a senior scientist with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation. "The crab may be the last."

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>>> TOMORROW In Asia and in Maryland, a chain of workers brings crab to American diners.

THE



SUN



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BALTIMORE BLAST WINS MISL TITLE
>>>> IN SPORTS

SEATTLE HOLDS UP O'S, 4-3
>>>> IN SPORTS

Models of middle school success

2 charters flourish, but city rarely seeks their input

BY SARA NEUFELD
[SUN REPORTER]

Educators came to Baltimore last week from Massachusetts, New York, Washington and Virginia to study the success of the Crossroads School.

They talked to pupils who, despite impoverished backgrounds, have published a book, made a model of the solar system and outscored their peers, not only around the city but in some cases statewide as well.

Yet few in the Baltimore school system were paying attention. Of 70 conference participants, two came from other city schools — both of them teachers hungry for ideas.

Crossroads is one of two charter middle schools in the city receiving national recognition for their work educating vulnerable children at a particularly vulnerable age. The other, KIPP Ujima Village Academy, is part of a network of schools held up by Oprah Winfrey last month as an urban education model the same week she lashed out at the Baltimore school system for its poor track record.

Meanwhile, city school system officials are grappling with how to reform their 23 traditional middle schools, all of which are failing. They have said that middle schools nationwide have the same problems, and that few models to emulate exist. But staff at Crossroads and KIPP say the system has generally not turned for guidance to the schools, which are producing high student achievement with the same population as ordinary city schools.

"There hasn't really been a concerted effort for a dialogue," said Jason Botel, principal of KIPP, where 90 percent of sixth-graders passed last year's state test in math, compared with 28 percent city-wide. "We'd love for that to [Please see MIDDLE, 7A]

WEATHER

SCATTERED CLOUDS

High, 70; low 41. Yesterday's high 68, low, 48. Expect dry conditions; showers possible at midweek.

>>>> PG 10B



A SUN SPECIAL REPORT CRAB FACTORY // PART TWO OF TWO

Thousands of Asian workers on a new global supply line are supplanting an old Maryland-based food chain



WORKING THE WATER

Article BY STEPHANIE DESMON AND GADY A. EPSTEIN [SUN REPORTERS]
Photographs BY CHIAKI KAWAJIRI [SUN PHOTOGRAPHER]



Smith Island crabbers begin work at sunrise on the Chesapeake. A waterman, at top, shows how to tell a female blue crab (top) from a male.

On Smith Island, Donna Smith knows there's only one thing for women like her to do once their men have delivered their catch of Chesapeake Bay blue crabs and the crabs have been steamed and silenced for good.

TYLERTON

They have to get to work, the tedious, monotonous work of picking crabmeat. Geography and nature have set the boundaries of what they do as surely as geography and nature have set the boundaries of the island.

Some of the women were born into this life. Others married into it, knowing that their fate for at least six months out of the year would be to separate crabs from their shells with as much speed and dexterity as they could muster, picking fast enough each day to stay ahead of the next day's catch.

"If there's a crabber in your family, chances are you pick crabs," says Smith, a picker who has lived on the island for nearly

four decades and raised two sons here. "On Tylerton, there's nothing else for us to do."

The work these women do defines their lives, and yet now it can easily be done elsewhere by others. For every nimble-fingered woman picking crab with a curled knife on Smith Island, there are hundreds of women in Asia doing the same work just as fast. For every crabber on Smith Island, there are thousands from Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Myanmar and Thailand. The boundaries previously set by geography and nature have been broken down by the brute force of capital and labor.

[Please see CRAB, 8A]



Tina Corbin, president of the Smith Island Crabmeat Cooperative, picks crabs. Her daughter, Taylor, stops by the Tylerton co-op.

>>> ONLINE For photo galleries, podcasts and archived coverage of Maryland's crab industry, go to baltimoresun.com/mdcrabs

Fighting for his Eastern Shore home

Political campaigner turns grass-roots environmentalist to protect the Chesapeake Bay

BY RONA KOBELL
[SUN REPORTER]

WITTMAN // Just before the sun sets over Cummings Creek, Joe Trippi ambles over to say hello to Yoda, the one-horned goat, and Mrs. Lucky, one of his favorite ducks.

He seems a world away from where he was three years ago: inhaling Diet Pepsi, stuffing his



cheeks with Skoal, and trying to elect an obscure former Vermont governor as president of the United States. These days, when Trippi's not in Italy advising Romano Prodi's campaign or in Moscow addressing the Carnegie Endow-

ment for International Peace, he is here, surrounded by old-growth pines and noisy chickens, trying to safeguard the Eastern Shore's open spaces from fast-encroaching development.

For the past several months, Trippi has quietly been working with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation in an effort to stop the Blackwater Resort, a 3,200-home development slated to be built near Blackwater National Wildlife Ref-

uge and Cambridge. He has joined the board of the Eastern Shore Land Conservancy, an organization dedicated to preserving the Shore's rural landscapes.

But his biggest plans are ahead of him. He wants to coordinate grass-roots gatherings and mass Internet drives in the style of the Howard Dean campaign, this time to rile the public about imminent threats to the bay. Trippi

[Please see TRIPPI, 6A]

Protest called across nation

Local immigrants consider joining work stoppage

BY KELLY BREWINGTON
[SUN REPORTER]

Sergio Vargas won't lay bricks at his construction firm today. Rosa Gauman will not change bedsheets at a downtown hotel. And loyal customers hoping to savor the mole sauce at Arcos, a Mexican restaurant in Upper Fells Point, will have to wait until tomorrow.

Immigrant workers nationwide have threatened to turn today — International Workers' Day — into a display of defiance with a work stoppage and boycott to symbolize the reliance of the U.S. economy on immigrant labor. In doing so, they will call for reform that would guarantee a path to U.S. citizenship for the nation's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants.

Even in Baltimore, a city whose immigrant profile pales in contrast to burgeoning destinations such as Phoenix or established epicenters such as Los Angeles, the hope for immigration reform has propelled activism among legal and illegal immigrants alike and sparked calls for a unified immigrant voice, particularly among Latinos.

"It will be a strong show of unity," said Nicolas Ramos, owner of Arcos, who moved to the United States from Mexico 19 years ago. He plans to close Arcos as well as the construction firm he owns in Baltimore. "The solidarity will be huge. It will show everyone who we are. We are so many Latinos here. ... We have the power."

But it's unclear how cohesive today's protests will be. Most national immigrant advocacy groups are warning against the work stoppage, dubbed "A Day without an Immigrant." They say that a boycott is premature and could cause a backlash from employers. Instead, many groups are promoting "A Day of Immigrant Action," organizing after-work voter-registration events and [Please see IMMIGRANTS, 7A]

INSIDE

WORLD IRAQ TALKS

Iraq's president has met with insurgent groups and believes they can be persuaded to end rebellion.

>>>> PG 11A

MARYLAND DARFUR PROTESTS

Marylanders join thousands in Washington to demand the end of bloodshed in Sudan.

>>>> PG 1B

TODAY GALBRAITH REMEMBERED

John Kenneth Galbraith is remembered as a witty economist who urged government to devote wealth to social needs.

>>>> PG 2C

SPECIAL REPORT // CRAB FACTORY

Geography, nature set boundaries



Using a handmade dip net, Bill James scoops blue crabs from an 1,800-foot line of rope baited with chicken necks in the Choptank River, near the Chesapeake Bay.

CRAB [From Page 1A]

The old Maryland-based food chain — small and, at best, static — is being supplanted by a new one, dramatically changing the story of who brings crab to Americans and of how they do it. That new supply chain starts in waters vaster and deeper than the Chesapeake Bay and ends in supermarkets and restaurants all over the United States.

How Asian crabs become a packaged American consumer product is a tale of all the humanity that constitutes a global industry, of entrepreneurs taking big chances to make big money, of people exploiting nature and each other for personal gain, of laborers so desperate to pursue better lives that they leave wives and children behind for years at a time.

They are all yoked together by their individual stakes in each 1-pound can of crab, in the nearly \$300 million-a-year industry that brings the world's crabmeat to the American market. On this new production line, a band of itinerant Burmese fishermen living on a wooden boat begins a process that ends with well-dressed suburbanites sitting down to a crab cake meal in the world's richest country. The Maryland crabbers and pickers are increasingly left out.

From a place as isolated as Tylerton, the islanders say, it's difficult to battle with the corporations mass-producing what was once their homegrown specialty.

One of the restaurants on Smith Island has even sold crab cakes made from Asian crab to tourists who come for seemingly authentic Maryland fare. "It wasn't much of a secret when people saw him bring it in on the stern of his boat," says Tina Corbin, president of the Smith Island Crabmeat Cooperative.

Six afternoons a week, from May or June and often until Thanksgiving, the men tie up their boats at Tylerton's rickety dock and deliver the day's catch to the co-op's screened-in porch, where two giant metal steamers will render the crabs just the right hue of orange. The crabs will cool in a walk-in refrigerator. Only then can the picking begin.

Each basket of Maryland blue crabs will yield 6 or 7 pounds of the creamy crabmeat. And each pound of crabmeat sold by the cooperative will bring in \$15. Sometimes the pickers' earnings are limited by how much crab comes in. More often, they are limited by time — there are only so many hours in the day, and the crabs that can't be picked will have to be sold in the shell, for less.

When the room is filled with the women of the island, it feels more like a coffee klatch than the serious job it is. But make no mistake. They are busy, baskets of crabs spilled out before them waiting to be attacked. The women make quick work with thumb and forefinger, popping off the back shells and, with what seems like one graceful motion, scraping out the succulent lumps of crabmeat and tossing them, along with other pieces, into small plastic tubs.

They tell stories. They sing, beautiful spirituals with the striking a cappella of a long-practiced choir. They marvel at the speed with which Robin Bradshaw can pick a pound, creating mountains of snowy crabmeat in minutes. They laugh — a lot. They sit not far from a hand-lettered sign hung above a paper-towel rack: "Some things are worth hearing over and over again."

This isn't a factory for the world. It can't be. In its first year, less than a decade ago, the co-op picked 19,000 pounds of crabmeat. In 2005, it was roughly 10,000 pounds, just one day's work in some plants overseas.

On Smith Island, tucked into the bay a 40-minute ferry ride from Crisfield, they are at the mercy of nature, which provides — but seems to provide a little less each year.

"Unlike farmers," says Christine Smith, Donna Smith's sister-in-law, "we reap, but we don't sow."

The Gulf of Thailand is a much bigger, richer Chesapeake Bay. Hundreds of commercial fishing boats stalk its waters every night as the blue swimming crab hunts for food and instead becomes it.

Working through the night on a Thai boat, hundreds of miles from home, seven men from Myanmar are raising crab traps from the watery depths. Invisible, unpredictable currents have delivered the crew to 9 degrees 39 minutes north latitude and 99 degrees 54 minutes east longitude, the starting point of a global supply chain. The meat from the crabs that they pull from



Aboard the Kaseamchai, Win sings as he raises crab traps from the Gulf of Thailand. Another crewmate pries the crabs from the mesh and tosses them into plastic buckets.

the water on this night will end up in restaurant kitchens in the United States months later, in cans labeled Jack's Catch.

Before the Thai blue swimming crab becomes a Maryland-style crab cake, a Burmese fisherman named Luktan will secure its snapping claws with rubber bands and throw it in an oxygenated seawater tank, so that it can live to be steamed the next day by a squat man from Rangoon named Taihuen.

Then in another part of Thailand, 18-year-old Chusak Hakrin will rip off extraneous pieces of its shell with a furious speed that seems too mechanized to be human, so that a fellow Thai named Slawut can cook it again in the hot, stuffy steaming room next door.

Khun Yupa, a 24-year-old Thai mother of one, will pick out the crab's precious white lumps of meat as quickly as she can without cutting herself, because she and her co-workers are paid by the kilogram. Still more Thais will can the meat, pasteurize it and load it into a container for shipping to Miami.

The economic structure of this human assembly line begins to explain why, 9,000 miles away, the Chesapeake Bay crabber is almost as besieged a species as the Maryland blue crab. All the fishermen and laborers who handle the crab will collectively earn less than a few dollars out of every 1-pound can — whether it sells for \$10 or \$30 — the laborers on land earning \$3 to \$5 a day, the fishermen earning more in exchange for living all but several days a month on a 50-foot boat.

Life is a hard and unbending routine in the vicinity of 99 degrees east, 9 degrees north. The crew of seven Burmese fishermen, led by a Thai boat captain, wakes up aboard the *Kaseamchai*, meaning "Joyful Triumph," about 9 p.m. every evening, after four hours' sleep, to begin collecting and emptying nearly 4,000 nylon-mesh traps.

A motorized winch pulls the rope holding the traps, but these men do the rest of the work, handling the traps at a pace of one every five seconds. On this night, a crewman named Win — many Burmese go by one name — grabs each trap off the line while another crewman stands in the lower hold making sure the rope comes in coiled neatly enough to go back out the next day. Win hands the traps to a crewmate who pries the crabs free from the mesh and tosses them into small plastic buckets.

These crabs, mottled and bluish-green, are noticeably different from their Chesapeake Bay counterparts. They are feisty and desperate enough to claw through the meshing of some of the traps, so a crewman in a cap sits quietly to one side near the front of the boat, stitching the ripped meshing back together.

Luktan, the chief crewman, takes care of the frantic claws. He pulls the crabs from the buckets with his gloved hands and binds the fierce pincers with rubber bands, and then throws the animals into a tank of seawater.

The men keep pace with the tireless winch until they are finished almost eight hours later, at close to 5 a.m., when they radio for a smaller boat that is making the rounds in the area, picking up the catches to bring back to the port of Donsak. Thirty minutes later and the delivery boat is off, and the men are wolfing down a meal of shrimp, pork and vegetables prepared by a crewman who doubles as the galley cook.

About 5:30 a.m., the crew members each find a familiar spot of floorboard and nap for 90 minutes. Then it's three hours more of sewing traps and baiting them for the night. Later they begin dropping the traps into the sea again for five sunbaked hours.

They clean up and get ready to sleep at 5 p.m. The toilet is the Gulf of Thailand at the stern; the bed, a hard plank of boat.

The cycle begins again four hours later. It continues without letup for three or four weeks, until the boat comes to shore for a few days.

"I am a poor man. I just wake up and do the job that they ask me to so I can make money, and that's it," Luktan says. "There is no other job, so this is the only way for me to make money."

Luktan, 27, has been reliving this same exhausting day for more than seven years and gets about the highest reward of any of the laborers who will handle this catch in Thailand: \$10 a day, much more than any of those who will later sort, steam, pick, can and pasteurize this crab.

Money is the only reason that men such as Luktan are willing to live years apart from their homeland and their families — his wife came from Myanmar to join him only last year — but it is reason enough. Back home in Ware-ka-por, a coastal fishing village, Luktan could earn only a small fraction of what he gets now. The future, [Please see CRAB, 9A]



After working three weeks without letup, the crew of the Kaseamchai returns to the Donsak pier. After a few days on shore, the seven Burmese fishermen and Thai boat captain will return to sea.

ON A BUSY DAY THERE CAN BE MORE PICKERS IN ONE FACTORY IN ONE THAI TOWN THAN THERE WERE WORKING LAST YEAR IN ALL OF MARYLAND'S CRAB HOUSES COMBINED.



Thai factories of American companies, such as Blue Star Food Products, above, have a rigid, standardized way of processing crab for their exports to pass U.S. Food and Drug Administration inspections. At right, quality specialist Putchalee Tongpanich, 25, checks the smell of the crabmeat at the Blue Star plant in Trat.

CRAB [From Page 8A]

he realized, was in Thailand. Crossing illegally 10 years ago, Luktan eventually journeyed to the eastern port of Donsak, a gateway to the waters that had just become one of the wellsprings of a global crabbing industry. The Gulf of Thailand had become this country's Chesapeake Bay.

Bill James' sturdy workboat is practically pacing the Chop-tank River, on the prowl for someone else's dinner.

He has been catching blue crabs in this very spot not far from the Chesapeake Bay for most of his 70 years, full time for the past 20. Until recently, the business was regional and played out mostly within a few hundred miles of where James' 40-foot boat, the *Valmar Jon*, is docked.

The way James does his job has hardly changed over time. He still wakes in the blackness of the morning and checks the Eastern Shore weather forecast. He brings along a sack lunch fixed by his wife and drives his truck to a dock a few miles from home. He still uses the same low-tech equipment he has used for decades — a few 1,800-foot lines of rope with a bait of thawing chicken necks tied on at three-foot intervals, a handmade dip net to snag the critters as they try to race away, some shabby wooden bushel baskets.

His personal market is the same too. Just about every crab he catches is sold to the 116-year-old J.M. Clayton Co. in Cambridge, full baskets delivered to the dock every afternoon to be weighed and carried off to the industrial steamers on site. Clayton's cadre of workers — most of them seasonal employees from Mexico — will have James' catch in 1-pound plastic containers headed for store shelves and home refrigerators by the end of the next business day.

The market forces of the crab industry aren't something James has studied. What he knows is the blue crab. Where it swims. When it is biting. When it isn't anymore. How to lure it — and dozens of its friends — onto his boat.

It's a delicate dance to catch crabs the way James does it. They aren't hooked on James' line. Or trapped in a pot, as most Maryland watermen do it. They're just treading water, snacking on the chicken necks that float enticingly above, holding on as if to a life preserver. When James spots them, he has to act fast, wielding his net like a lacrosse stick and scooping up the crustaceans one by one. This works only if James sees the crab before the crab sees him. "In the blink of an eye he can be off the line and gone," James explains. "They fly right off."

Some years it's hard to make a living this way. When the crabs aren't biting, there's little money coming in. Other times, the price is so good it makes more financial sense to sell the crabs and dine on steaks. But crab is a more typical meal in James' world.

"You can make some money. I don't know about good money. I've never known a rich waterman," James says.

He starts to separate his first batch of crabs. Males go in one basket, females in another. He can spot the females in an instant. They have red-tinged claws, their manicures setting them apart from the rest. They taste sweeter.

But Clayton offers better money for the males. Restaurants want the males because they're larger and easier for diners to crack open on paper-topped tables. The females — and some males, depending on size and season — will be whisked inside Clayton, where they may be destined for the plate as a crab cake.

On this day, the females, also known as sooks, will go for \$16 a bushel — the lowest price for the girls so far in the season. The jimmies, as they call the males in these parts, will get \$36 a bushel. One week at the start of last summer — when crabs were scarce and tourists came in droves with a hunger for them — each bushel of jimmies earned him \$109.

While on the water, James can't help but tally his expected earnings in his head. By the time he



calls it a day, he has 12 bushels of crabs — six of females and six of males. By the time he gets to Clayton's dock, James figures he has earned a solid payday of \$310.

But as he pulls up, his wallet lightens. Today's price stares at him in black and white: A handwritten note posted on a pole at the dock gives him the news. Male crabs aren't fetching \$36 a bushel like yesterday. They're going instead for just \$25. Supply and demand in James' world is local, not global. There's not enough demand for crabs on this day so he must settle for less. This is how it works.

"They cut the price on me," he says, disgusted.

One lesson of globalization is that hardship is relative. The Maryland crab worker's rung on the economic ladder may be rusty and worn, something to be held on to, not climbed. But the crab workers along the coast of Thailand are climbing an entirely different ladder: The rungs are just lesser degrees of poverty.

Taihuen, 26, starts his days in the port of Donsak when the first boats hauling live crabs come in and often finishes 14 hours later. It is a daily marathon of back-bending work, shoveling pieces of rubber and rambutan trees into a wood furnace, dumping bushels of crabs into steel steamers fired by the furnace, then shoveling more wood. His wife's long days of sorting picked crabmeat begin at 6:30 a.m.

Their reward for this work might seem small, about \$50 a week between them, but that's more than Taihuen used to earn in a year back home in Rangoon.

At this dockside crab operation, the only people getting rich are the Choeyklins — Nantanee, the mayor of Donsak, and her husband, Somsak — who run the pier as efficiently and paternalistically as any successful factory boss in the developing world. But whether such bosses are ruthless exploiters or generous heroes is a matter of per-

spective: The Burmese migrants who work for the Choeyklins would much prefer to live in this poverty than in the poverty they once knew.

The poverty that Taihuen and his wife, Nira, know now is a mattress protected by mosquito netting on a bare concrete floor. They live in a two-room section of a warehouse, with a video compact disc player, a television and columns of empty beer cans. The kitchen is a hot plate, a gas burner and a wok. The air conditioning is a floor fan. There is no furniture.

The only relics of Myanmar are the family pictures, and Nira, 25, lingers over one of them as she stands barefoot in a sarong-like skirt at 5 a.m. It's a portrait of her 3-year-old son, Su, who is back in Myanmar. She says nothing, but her eyes begin to tear.

"I followed my husband," she explained. "We came here just to work, to earn money."

Is it worth it? she is asked. She chooses not to say. For their individual roles in catching, sorting and steaming tons of crab in the previous 36 hours, each of the Burmese workers will earn just cents — or a fraction of a cent — per pound of crab. The tons of crab they processed will be worth tens of thousands of dollars in the United States, with the premium meat going for up to \$29 a pound.

Some of the laborers wonder how much a single 1-pound can of this Asian crab sells for in America. The answer is an accounting more ruthless than a factory boss: That can would cost more of them more than a week's salary.

Dan Viravong was holding forth in the port city of Trat, near Thailand's border with Cambodia, when he glanced at his Porsche outside his office. His mind switched gears, anticipating his next spin along the coast.

"That's my toy," said the 41-year-old father of three. More accurately, it's just one of his toys. There's also his boat, his huge waterfront house and his SeaRay airplane, which he had shipped from Orlando, Fla. He usually likes to fly it [Please see CRAB, 10A]



"I FOLLOWED MY HUSBAND. WE CAME HERE JUST TO WORK, TO EARN MONEY."

NIRA, 25, A BURMESE MIGRANT, AT LEFT, GETTING READY FOR WORK AT THE PLANT ON THE DONSAK PIER. HER LONG DAYS OF SORTING PICKED CRABMEAT BEGIN AT 6:30 A.M.

SPECIAL REPORT // CRAB FACTORY

In need of a suitable substitute

CRAB [From Page 9A]

around the neighborhood, he said, sometimes taking it to Bangkok 200 miles away.

Viravong is proud of his toys. They are the material representation of his success as the reigning king of canned crabmeat in Thailand, ever since Baltimore-based Phillips Foods decided to focus elsewhere in the region. Though born in Thailand, Viravong speaks with a bit of a Southern twang from his years in Mobile, Ala. His company, Grand Bay Seafood, used to get its blue crabs from Mobile Bay.

About the time Viravong went to Thailand eight years ago to get crab, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration learned of allegations that he and Grand Bay Seafood had purchased Asian crab, mixed it with domestic crabmeat and labeled it as an American product. Viravong later pleaded guilty to federal misdemeanor charges of misbranding food and was fined \$15,000 and sentenced to two years' probation.

Once he decided to set up an operation in his native country, though, he was instantly successful, he said, with \$5 million in U.S. sales of his Thai crabmeat in his first year. Last year, he had \$30 million in U.S. sales, he said.

He employs hundreds of workers to pick, can, pasteurize and ship about 200,000 pounds of crabmeat a month to the United States under a multitude of labels, including Grand Bay, Gulf Coast Crab and Jack's Catch.

"This place was a shrimp pond when I came here in 1998," Viravong said. It's a factory complex now.

Globalization rewards places that are cheap and well-located and, unlike the Chesapeake Bay, well-stocked with natural resources. Easy access to a nearby container port and a relatively low-cost pool of workers familiar with crab turned a quaint town of 20,000 into a good place to do business. A major competitor — but smaller, Viravong notes — Blue Star Food Products, has a crab factory on the other side of town.

Both companies have a rigid, standardized way of processing crab — by necessity because they have to pass inspections by the FDA if they want to export to the United States. That means all people handling crabmeat are in uniforms that include rubber gloves, rubber boots and hairnets, and the smell of disinfecting chlorine is almost as prevalent as the smell of crab, which permeates every room.

The 400 pounds of crab caught by Luktan's crew arrives in a refrigerated truck at Viravong's crab factory more than 60 hours after the first traps were pulled from the Gulf of Thailand.

In Trat, the crabs pass through a frenzied human shelling machine. Nearly 70 men and women in two cramped rooms rip apart the extraneous bits of shell and separate the claws and legs and throw the various parts into buckets.

The work will make it easier for the crabs to be picked later, but it makes for a dizzying sight unlike any that occurs in nature: crab parts and detritus in a constant state of midair motion.

The workers get paid by the pound, so they are motivated to work at an almost impossible speed. Chusak Hakrin's hands move so quickly as he twists and shucks each crab that, aside from a goofy smile, he looks like a robot or a special effect. "The more you work, the faster you are," the 18-year-old said without slowing down.

The crab parts then go directly to the steaming room next door, where they are steamed a second time to kill germs before picking, and are eventually placed in a refrigerator again. The picking will take place the next day, more than 72 hours after the crabs were caught.

The tremendous scale of the Asian crab business can be understood in the picking rooms. On a busy day there can be more pickers in this one factory in one Thai town — as many as 500 — than there were working last year in all of Maryland's crab houses combined.

The pickers, virtually all women, work in teams in five rooms: three rooms for Thai workers, one room for Thai Muslims (so, plant workers said, they could observe their religious duties without being disrupted or disrupting others), and another room for ethnic Cambodians with special work permits as refugees or the relatives of refugees.

They will sort the lumps into several sizes — "mega," the largest and most valuable size, "jumbo" and "lump" — and the remaining body meat, claw meat and "finger cocktail" meat as well into separate plastic containers. Then the meat goes back into the fridge.

Two days later, the meat will be packed into cans. The day after that, the cans will be pasteurized in extreme heat in a large steel vat and then quickly cooled.

A week after Luktan's crabs were caught in the Gulf of Thailand, the cans of crab are ready for shipping to the United States.

On a shelf in an upscale grocery store in suburban Minneapolis, LoAnn Mockler, a marketing executive who tries her hand at cooking new dishes whenever she can, finds two 6-ounce cans of blue swimming crab for \$11.99 apiece that are packaged by a company that does its business in Trat.

On the menu at her cooking club's monthly get-together are crab cakes on a bed of greens, a specialty that Mockler, 51, first made for the group several years ago. Crab cakes weren't common in Minnesota, but she had tried them at a downtown restaurant years back and couldn't get them off her mind.

So she set out to replicate the meal, consulting her floor-to-ceiling bookshelf packed with cookbooks. She tested many recipes, rejecting several. One had some nerve calling itself a crab cake, what with the peppers, celery, onions, even capers.

Many crab cake recipes call for fresh blue crab. Most people need to find a suitable substitute — and not just those living in Minnesota.



In the summer and fall, from the Chesapeake Bay southward (and in a few upscale restaurants in major cities), it is possible to find the real thing. But even in Maryland in the middle of the summer, local crabmeat can be hard to come by.

"I would say probably 90 percent of restaurants — maybe even higher — are using foreign crabmeat in Maryland," said Noreen Eberly, director of the seafood marketing program at the state Department of Agriculture.

Asian crabmeat is becoming ubiquitous — in tubs packed in Thailand, in cans from China, in pouches from Indonesia, in crab cakes assembled on U.S. soil. The No. 1-selling food item on QVC, the home shopping channel, is crab cakes sold under the brand name Chesapeake Bay Gourmet and put together in a warehouse in Baltimore County — made mostly with frozen crabmeat imported from Asia.

Purists will insist the only crabmeat worth eat-



A kitchen worker, above, makes crab cakes containing Asian meat to serve at the Oceanaire Seafood Room in Baltimore's Harbor East. At left, a box of soft-shell crabs caught by Smith Island watermen is ready to be shipped.

ing comes from the Chesapeake Bay (a few will allow for other domestic crab, from the Gulf of Mexico or off the eastern coast of North Carolina or Florida). They speak of its sweetness, of its distinctive taste, of a flavor without equal. They scoff at the notion that blue swimming crab from Asia can even be considered the same foodstuff as the crabmeat they have eaten all of their lives, the same as they themselves extract on a picnic table with a crab mallet.

"Most people see these pretty lumps. They just think because it's a restaurant in Maryland, it's local crabmeat," said Smith Island crab picker Donna Smith. "I've had chefs say, if you put a little mayo and Old Bay in it, people will buy anything."

The question of taste would seem to be a troublesome wild card in the industrialization of the crab. How can a crab that's caught, steamed, picked, canned and pasteurized — and transported 9,000 miles — taste as good as a crab freshly caught in the Chesapeake Bay?

The answer, unfortunately for the watermen and pickers of Maryland, is that even a noticeable difference in taste is irrelevant. Across the country, diners rarely have the option of fresh American crab.

There is usually only one choice, and it's imported. It tastes enough like the Chesapeake Bay's blue crab to work. The proof is not in the crab cakes but in the bills of sale.

"I'll be the first one to admit Maryland crabmeat is superior," said Paul Jarrett, executive chef of the Oceanaire Seafood Room in Baltimore's Harbor East. But this upscale Minnesota-based chain, which prides itself on serving only the freshest seafood, buys tens of thousands of pounds of crabmeat annually from Phillips, an American outlet selling predominantly Asian seafood.

The restaurants must buy Asian because of the volume that they need, Jarrett said. Other chefs say Asian meat's long shelf life also makes it popular with restaurants that want Maryland-style crab cakes on their menus. The lumps of Asian crabmeat are typically larger and whiter than its domestic counterparts — making for a more visually appealing meal. It can also be cheaper than domestic crabmeat.

"You get what's the best available to you," said Honey Konicoff, a spokeswoman for Phillips Foods.

About a thousand miles from the Chesapeake Bay, Mockler knows there's probably nothing that quite compares to a crab cake made from freshly caught Maryland blue crab. But here she is in Crystal, an inner-ring suburb of Minneapolis, making crab cakes in the kitchen of her split-level house, with her book-publisher husband and her college-student daughter at her side. She has made them for friends before — to rave reviews.

She'll prepare the golf-ball-size mounds of crabmeat and crushed saltines and, of course, Old Bay and mayonnaise, carefully measuring them out with an orange plastic measuring cup. Then she will get into her Toyota and take the crab cakes to her good friends Kim and Jim Lindhal's house, where she'll fry them in a heavy cast-iron pan on a fancy stainless-steel cooktop.

As the crab cakes cook, they turn golden brown, with small and steady bubbles of olive oil licking at the edges. In a middle-class home in middle America, crab cakes are on the menu at a small dinner party among friends, a true sign that they have caught on in a place where they couldn't even have been had a decade ago.

Here, on a dining room table in suburban Minneapolis, is a Maryland-style crab cake made from blue swimming crab caught in the Gulf of Thailand.

Mockler lifts her glass of Wisconsin sauvignon blanc. Then she brings her fork to the crab cake that has landed here, on a bed of greens on a pretty red plate many miles from the nearest ocean. She and the others take a taste. Another culinary success, they agree.

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ABOUT THE SERIES



DESMON



EPSTEIN



KAWAJIRI

Stephanie Desmon and Gady A. Epstein began their reporting for this series in 2005. Desmon, a member of *The Sun's* state staff, reported from the Eastern Shore, Washington and Minneapolis, Minn., as well as Baltimore. Epstein, former Beijing correspondent for *The Sun*, reported in Thailand. Staff photographer Chiaki Kawajiri worked alongside both reporters, in Southeast Asia as well as the United States.



At M&I Seafood in Rosedale, workers carry a tray of Chesapeake Bay Gourmet brand crab cakes to the freezer before they're boxed and shipped in dry ice across the country.

'Made in USA'

But most meat in Md. firm's crab cakes comes from Asia

BY STEPHANIE DESMON (SUN REPORTER)

The routine isn't rehearsed, but after hundreds of appearances on the QVC shopping channel over the past decade, Ron and Margie Kauffman know what they'll say when it comes to the millions of Maryland-style crab cakes they sell under the brand Chesapeake Bay Gourmet.

There is plenty of talk about the large lumps of crabmeat, about the company's ties to Maryland and the Chesapeake. On QVC's Web site, the products are labeled "Made in USA."

What the carefully worded language omits is one critical fact. Little, if any, of the crabmeat used in the company's crab cakes is from the Chesapeake Bay or even the United States.

There is nothing dishonest about the labeling. The crab cakes — ranging from bite-sized hors d'oeuvres to dinner portions — are, in fact, assembled in a Baltimore County warehouse. But the bright white lumps of crabmeat that spill through each crab cake come mostly from Asia, with a little from Mexico and some "small percentage" from Maryland, though company founder Ron Kauffman Sr. won't say how much.

Kauffman's business, which has operated for more than 25 years, didn't always rely on foreign crabmeat. For years, the small company he and his wife ran with other relatives bought each pound of crabmeat from suppliers on Maryland's Eastern Shore.

That ensured that the company stayed small. Then, at almost the same time, QVC discovered the Kauffmans and the Kauffmans discovered Asia. There couldn't have been one relationship without the other.

Global forces that brought to the United States a cousin of the Maryland blue crab — caught in the waters off Southeast Asia — have allowed the Kauffmans to sell 8 million to 10 million crab cakes annually, about 5 million of them on QVC last year. In Maryland, just under 2.5 million pounds of local crabmeat were produced last year.

"It was very gut-wrenching that we even had to go away from Maryland meat," Ron Kauffman said. "We're very proud people that love selling Maryland-style crab cakes."

But, he added, "The customers are more concerned about the quality of the product than the origin of it."

Others in the industry have long struggled with the notion that the crabmeat they sell is not fresh domestic blue crab but something called blue swimming crab caught in Southeast Asia and pasteurized to make the long journey to American consumers.

When Miami-based John Keeler & Co. began selling Asian crab a decade ago, "it was comical," said spokesman Steve Harmell. "We had to literally give our product away. We had to beg people to try it. 'Are you kidding me? Blue crabmeat from Thailand?'" Now its Blue Star brand is a top seller.

The strategy has been to play down where the crab comes from. Still, the information is often there — if you know where to look for it. Small print on most cans and tubs of crabmeat names its country of origin. Somewhere on most boxes of crab cakes in supermarket freezers the source of crab is divulged. For example, boxes of crab cakes sold in some Wal-Marts made by Handy International — based in Crisfield on Maryland's Eastern Shore — read "Product of Thailand."

In 2002, Bethesda-based Made in the USA Foundation sued Phillips Foods in U.S. District Court in Baltimore, claiming that it was misleading customers into believing its products were made with Maryland seafood by saying they were made in the United States — even though nearly all of the Baltimore company's crab comes from Asia. The lawsuit was dismissed, but Phillips packages today are clearly marked.

Back at M&I Seafood, which makes the Chesapeake Bay Gourmet brand crab cakes sold on QVC, women in hairnets, green rubber gloves and white aprons slice open 1-pound bags of frozen crabmeat. Co-workers take a slurry of ingredients — mayonnaise, mustard, Worcestershire sauce, cracker crumbs, eggs and bay spices — and slowly mix them together with the crab. With ice cream scoops, they place the concoction onto cookie sheets for a trip to the freezer. In 20 minutes, the crab cakes will be as hard as hockey pucks and ready to be boxed and shipped in dry ice across the country.

"Could you tell if you were blindfolded which was fresh [from Maryland] and which was from Asia? I'm not so sure," Ron Kauffman said.

"Good old boys from the Eastern Shore say there's nothing better" than local crabmeat, he said. "The numbers of how crab cakes are selling around the country — that tells you something."