With the opening of the highly anticipated California Dungeness crab sport season on Saturday and the commercial season opening next week, state officials are predicting another record-breaking year for the tasty crustacean.

Steamed and cracked, served with a green salad, plenty of sourdough bread — it's a party waiting to happen.

To cook, plunge the crab, head first, into boiling salted water to cover. Boil 15 to 20 minutes, or until shell turns red. Drain, plunge into cold water, drain again and cool.

To clean, break off claws and legs close to body, crack the claws with a nutcracker and remove the meat. Break off the pointed apron or tail. Take the crab in both hands and pull the upper and lower shells apart, beginning at the tail.

Wash away loose matter under running water and remove membranous covering round side. Remove meat between sections, picking out any cartilage.

Six crabs yield about 1 cup of meat.

CRAB CAKES

1 pound crabmeat, picked free of shells

1/3 cup crushed Ritz Crackers

3 green onions (green and white parts), finely chopped

1/2 cup finely chopped bell pepper

1/4 cup mayonnaise

1 egg

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon dry mustard

1/2 lemon, juiced

1/4 teaspoon garlic powder

1 teaspoon salt

Dash cayenne pepper

Flour, for dusting

1/2 cup peanut oil

Favorite dipping sauce for serving

Be sure crab meat is picked free of shells.

In a large bowl, mix together all ingredients, except for the flour and peanut oil. Shape into patties and dust with flour.

Heat oil in a large skillet over medium heat. When oil is hot, carefully place crab cakes, in batches, in pan and fry until browned, about 4 to 5 minutes. Carefully flip crab cakes and fry on other side until golden brown, about 4 minutes. Serve warm with preferred sauce. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

CRAB DIABLO

1-1/4 pound fresh Dungeness crabmeat

2 cups heavy cream

1 large shallot, minced

4 tablespoons Dijon mustard

1 ounce brandy or cognac

1 tablespoon parsley, chopped

1 pinch cayenne pepper

2 tablespoons pimento, chopped

1/2 tablespoon butter

1 tablespoon fresh bread crumbs

In a heavy saucepot, gently sauté minced shallot over moderate heat in butter for about 1 minute. Add heavy cream and reduce over moderate heat until only about 1-1/3 cups remain.

In a mixing bowl, whisk together mustard with small amounts of the cream mixture. Add brandy, parsley, pimento and cayenne pepper.

Preheat oven to 375°F. Combine sauce with fresh crab meat and divide into four baking dishes. Sprinkle with bread crumbs and bake in the oven about 12 minutes or until hot and bubbling. Garnish with lemon and parsley. Serve with crusty French bread and a cool, crisp sparkling wine. Yields 4 servings.

NEW ORLEANS CRAB ETOUFFE´

1 stick butter

2 cups chopped onions

1 cup chopped celery

1/2 cup chopped green bell peppers

1 pound picked over lump crabmeat

2 teaspoons minced garlic

2 bay leaves

1 tablespoon flour

1 cup water

1 teaspoon salt

Pinch of cayenne

2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley

3 tablespoons chopped green onions

In a large sauté pan over medium-high heat, melt the butter. Add the onions, celery and bell peppers, and sauté until the vegetables are wilted, about 10 to 12 minutes. Add the crabmeat, garlic and bay leaves, and reduce the heat to medium. Heat until the crab is the temperature of the vegetables, stirring occasionally, but don't break up the crab. Dissolve the flour in the water and add to the crab mixture. Season with Kosher salt and cayenne. Stir until the mixture thickens, about 4 minutes. Stir in the parsley and green onions, and continue cooking for 2

minutes. Serve over steamed rice. Makes 4 servings.

DEVILED CRAB

3 tablespoons butter

1 cup soft white bread crumbs

1 small yellow onion, minced

1/2 small green pepper, cored, seeded, finely chopped

1 pound crab meat, flaked, shell and cartilage removed

1 egg, lightly beaten

1/2 cup mayonnaise

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper

Melt butter in a heavy 10-inch skillet over moderate heat. In a small bowl, blend 1 tablespoon of melted butter with 2/3 cup of bread crumbs, set aside the rest to use for topping. Add onion and green pepper to skillet, cook over moderate heat, stirring frequently until soft, about 5 minutes.

In medium-size bowl, mix crab meat, remaining 1/3 cup of bread crumbs, egg, mayonnaise, salt and cayenne pepper. Add onion and green pepper mixture, and stir well.

Spoon deviled crab mixture into 6 greased scallop shells or a greased 1-quart au gratin dish, and sprinkle with buttered bread crumbs. At this point, the deviled crab can be cooled, tightly covered and refrigerated for up to 6 hours.

Before serving, preheat oven to 350°F and bake 25 to 30 minutes, or until brown and bubbling. Makes 6 first-course servings.