

West Indies Salad – what a perfect topic for spring. This Gulf Coast favorite is a great treat that shouldn't be missed. As my friend Bunny Harris says, "If I see it, I'm getting it."

The creator of this concoction was Bill Bayley. He owned and operated Bayley's Restaurant down in Mobile. It was on what is now Dauphin Island Parkway in Theodore.

The restaurant, actually more of a small grocery, opened in 1947 and Bayley added West Indies Salad to his menu that year. It's been a staple ever since.

Bayley was a steward and later a chef, on board a merchant marine vessel. Legend has it that he bought a sack of lobsters and brought them back to the ship. He took what he could find – oil, vinegar, salt, pepper and some onions and mixed them with the cooked lobster meat. A dish was born.

When Bayley opened his restaurant, lobsters – even the warm water kind he had used – weren't available. So he used crabmeat for his salad instead. He called it West Indies salad because that where the ship was docked when he first made it.

OK, there is also a much less romantic version of the story, too. Bayley's son, Bill, Jr., says that his dad liked the southern favorite cucumber and onion salad. He always made it with ice water added. All he did was substitute crabmeat for the cucumber.

I think I'll stick with the first version. It makes for a better food yarn.

Yes Bayley was a chef but he was also a great promoter. He was a big man that always chewed a cigar. He had a large appetite, too – kind of like a lower Alabama Falstaff. He would show movies and cartoons at his place to get families to come and eat with their children. He had a knack for larger-than-life actions.

So what was the original West Indies salad? Why was the recipe for this simple salad so closely guarded?

The recipe is very easy. Any version I have seen has admonished the reader from straying from the method in any way. It wasn't until the

mid-sixties that a Junior League cookbook in Mobile actually published the recipe. Perhaps there is a West Indies salad police force out there just waiting for violators.

Here's what you do. Half a finely chopped onion goes in the bottom of a bowl. A pound of lump crabmeat is spread on top. After that you spread the rest of the onion on top of the crab. Then season with salt and pepper to taste.

Now pour over ½ cup of vegetable oil, then ½ cup cider vinegar and then ½ cup ice water. Cover the bowl and refrigerate for 2 hours up to 2 days. Toss before using.

That's it. Spread it on crackers, place on lettuce or serve it like you would shrimp cocktail. It's really very good.

If that much onion and you don't get along, cut the onion into very thin rings instead of chopping. That way you can eat just the crab and still have the onion flavor in the liquid.

In New Orleans you sometimes see capers and celery seed added to the mix. Bay leaves are also put in the liquid. I've had it down there served on a thick tomato slice. It worked for me.

At Jimmy's we make our own version. We use green onion and red pepper in small amounts. We season with Kosher salt and use Champagne vinegar, a touch of olive oil and a little sugar to cut the edge. We don't use water at all.

The way we do it, no marinating of the crabmeat is necessary. We think there is more crab flavor that way and the onion is not so pervasive. So if it's not on the menu, we can still make it for a guest on request.

If you want to keep your cost in check, you can use claw meat or regular lump instead of the jumbo lump crabmeat. The savings are substantial. You can even use small shrimp. But watch out for blue lights.

Bayley's still does this salad the same way as the original. So does Wintzell's in downtown Mobile. (Mr. Wintzell also chewed a cigar.) I've also had it at another Gulf Coast tradition – Nan Seas.

You need to give West Indies salad a try. It's great dish and so tasty. You'll please most folks when you have it.

One more interesting fact about Bill Bayley – he's the fellow that came up with the way to cut crab claws so that the claw is a handle and the meat is sort of "on a stick" at the other end. Then he fried them at his restaurant. Fried crab claws – a second Bill Bayley creation.

It was so good to have Dean Foy join us for lunch this past Sunday. He looked great and chowed down with his entourage. I told him that when I was in school at Auburn, he was a little quicker. So was I.