

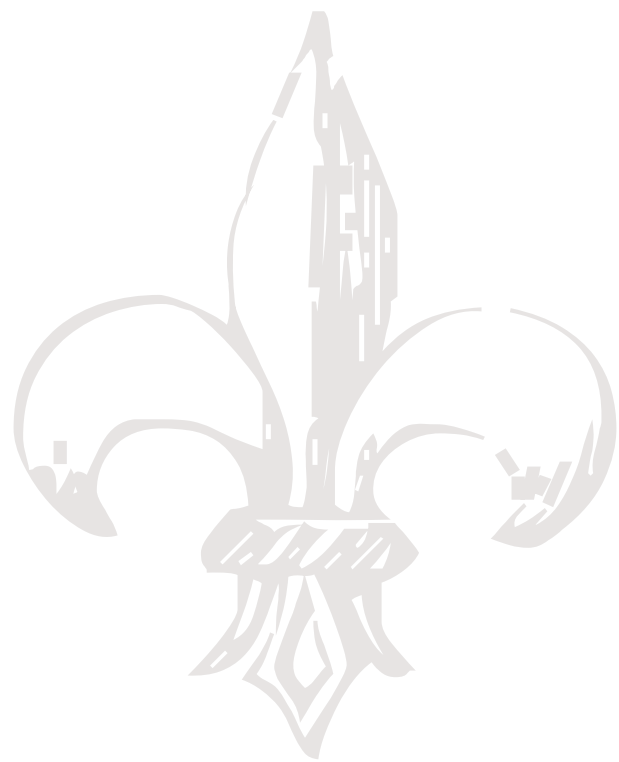
Chez Nous

En Louisiane



Making Her own Rhythm
Inside Bustin' Out
Spices





Edition *In This*

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SPICES BY KAMERYN ROME *cooking cajun and creole food*

He starts off with a tablespoon of salt. Measures a teaspoon each of granulated onion and granulated garlic with his measuring spoons. A teaspoon of thyme. A half a teaspoon of oregano. And, lastly, he adds a half of teaspoon of basil.

“And that’s a good general Cajun seasoning mix,” Chef Randy Cheramie says as he mixes the spices together.

And believe it or not, the spices are not only tasty. Research shows they’re good for you too.

Garlic. Cayenne pepper. Jalapeno pepper. Vinegar. Lemons. Onions. Even crab boil. And more. So break out the Tabasco, the Louisiana Hot Sauce, and just about any citrus you can think of. And enjoy with a clear conscience. They all kill bacteria.

But more on that later. Returning to Chef Cheramie, executive director and instructor at the Chef John Folse Culinary Institute at Nicholls State University, we find a master purveyor of bacteria killers extraordinaire. Like so many other bacteria executioners, Cheramie grew up in south Louisiana. In 1981, he purchased Randolph’s Restaurant from his family in Golden Meadow. The restaurant was a place “down the bayou,” serving lunch and fine dining. Being so close to the Gulf of Mexico, it was known for the Cajun and Creole foods such as fresh seafood flavored with Cajun spices. It was here he learned from his father and grandmother how to cook true Cajun cuisine. And he also learned that food, particularly seafood, had to handled and cooked correctly for not just taste, but safety.



One of Cheramie’s greatest culinary influences, and one of the legendary bacteria killers, is internationally-known chef Paul Prudhomme, one of the first people to successfully market his special blends of Cajun spices. “In the early 80s Prudhomme published The Louisiana Kitchen, and if you look at that book...” Cheramie goes over to the bookshelf in his office, grabs the book, and says, “This book is very near and dear to my heart because I didn’t go to culinary school.”

Even without traditional culinary training, Cheramie’s passion for cuisine fueled his learning. “Everything that I had learned from my family were good French, family cooking . . . and I wanted to learn everything I could about fine dining and Cajun-Creole cuisine,” Cheramie says. “And the only master of it at the time was this guy Paul Prudhomme.”

Cheramie cooked every recipe in Prudhomme’s book and used most of them in his restaurant. There is a Cajun seasoning blend consisting of dried seasonings as well as dried herbs listed at the beginning of each recipe.

Cheramie always makes sure that his dishes are cooked at proper temperatures, wears gloves when handling food and takes precautions to prevent food contamination. “It’s part of professional pride too. I would hate to know that something I did made someone sick,” he says.

Temperatures in this profession are important when it comes to safe food preparation. Cheramie explains that when cooking, getting food up to a 165-degree temperature is safe and to check meats, you can use meat thermometers. “The temperature danger zone is 41 to 135 degrees, especially around that 100-degree mark. Bacteria begins multiplying exponentially one to two, two to four, four to eight and so on... And within a minute, you have millions of them, so it is very important that you keep your hot food at proper temperatures for serving.”

“Cooking will eliminate a lot of harmful bacteria and food borne bacteria that causes things such as food poisoning, but washing your hands is a very good policy. When I work in the kitchen, the

first thing I do is wash my hands,” Cheramie says.

Now we come to another Nicholls professor involved in this story. When it comes to bacteria and preventing food poisoning, Dr. Raj Boopathy, Distinguished Service Professor at Nicholls, has done research on Cajun spices and through testing has discovered that some kill bacteria on meat, as well as seafood. He specializes in environmental microbiology, and when he first came to Nicholls, the culinary school was just starting. He was curious about the different spices used in cooking in the classes and observed some of them.

“I thought, ‘wow, the cooking school mainly use the spices for taste and enhancing the food’s flavor’, and I thought as a microbiologist that there is another purpose to the spices. Spices can control some of the bacteria that cause disease,” Boopathy explains.

Boopathy describes chefs as culinary professionals with different mindsets when it comes to bacteria, and he believes that some of these professionals do not even realize that the spices are controlling bacteria when they are being used. As a scientist, he observed the spices through a different looking glass and discovered some spices could regulate the bacteria in foods.

“Humans are made up of 37 trillion human cells,” Boopathy says. “But we have 100 trillion bacteria living inside. There are more good bacteria living on humans than bad ones.”

In Boopathy’s research, he discovered antimicrobials in different Cajun spices that can inhibit bacterial growth on food. “An antimicrobial is any chemical that will kill microorganisms such as bacteria and funguses,” he explains.

Capsaicin was the antimicrobial Boopathy found in hot peppers such as cayenne and jalapeno. These peppers are used in hot sauces and other Cajun spices such as crab boil.

The other antimicrobial that Boopathy found was allicin, which is in garlic. “Allicin is a compound that contains sulfur and phenyl which kills bacteria. The more garlic extract you use in food is not only good for your system, but it also controls and kills bacteria in the food,” Boopathy explains.

Boopathy tests different Cajun spices using an experiment called the zone of inhibition, which tells him the effectiveness of different spices on bacteria.



“If the chemical is effective, the bacteria will not grow near the disk, and that is called the zone of inhibition because it inhibits the growth of bacteria,” Boopathy explains. “You can clearly see the differences on the filter paper because one has a big zone here,” he says, pointing to the filter paper with a large circle in the middle and bacteria surrounding it. “And this is a small zone here,” he adds, pointing to the filter paper with a smaller circle in the middle. Boopathy’s experiment showed that one spice is more effective in killing bacteria than the other.

Other tests in the lab include injecting extracts from specific spices into a high-performance liquid chromatography machine that determines the names of each chemical used in the spice.

“Spices are natural products,” Boopathy explains. “It’s not man-made chemicals like preservatives. The

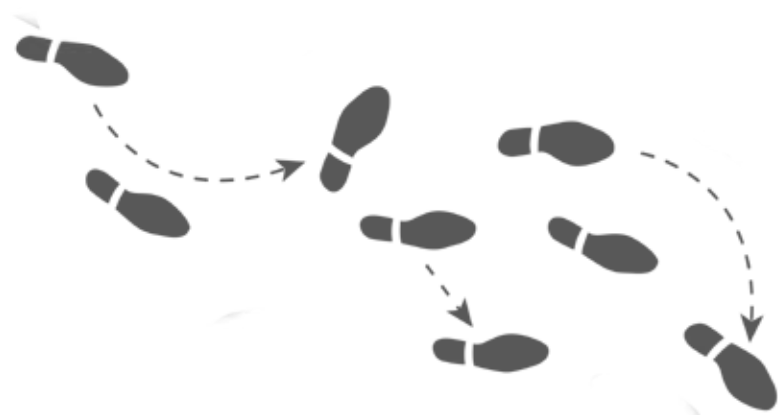
products that are in processed foods are actually harmful to people. On the other hand, spices are natural products and are evolved to co-evolve with people and is actually beneficial to us.”

Chef Cheramie would agree when it comes to food in his kitchen, he does not like to use chemicals and prefers to use natural Cajun spices and foods. And, according to Prof. Boopathy’s research, the benefits of spices go beyond killing bacteria. They also can preserve foods.

So next time you’re cooking in the kitchen and have an envie for some Cajun food, add the spices and put that extra dash of hot sauce or cayenne pepper - the spicier the better. And healthier.

making her own
Rhythm
STORY BY KAMERYN ROME

*Websters Dictionary:
Distinctive - having a quality or
characteristic that makes a per
son or thing different from oth
ers different in a way that is
easy to notice appealing or in
teresting because of an unusual
quality or characteristic.*



She prefers to ride her bike everywhere instead of using a car because she enjoys talking to everyone along her route. Some of them are students that go to the university where she teaches, or community members that knew her father when he taught at the university or just plain strangers. Most mornings she likes to bike on Menard Street to get to Nicholls. Sometimes she bikes Highway 1 or 7th Street. She often likes taking side streets at times because she likes to pick up cans to recycle. Sometimes she mentions that she teaches dance



classes and she offers dance classes to the people she meets.

"One of the best things that I did was volunteer a lot and teach dance classes. One time I taught a woman and her blind boyfriend to dance. He couldn't see me, but I was able to tell him how to dance," she says. "It was beautiful when they would bicycle together. The blind guy would be in the back, and she would lead him. It's just so interesting how we can do things in different ways to connect everyone," the instructor adds. People easily spot her around town because her

hair usually wild and up in bobby pins.

"Oh. Oh. Oh. Every semester someone asks how long my hair is. So normally what I do when people want to see it, I take it down to show them," she says as she starts to take a few bobby pins out of black hair sprinkled with a few grey strands. "But it's so thin and it always falls apart. I walk around when I do it," she continues as she paces the room and takes more bobby pins out of her hair, and it flows to her hips. "But we lose it when we get old. A lot of people tell me I should cut my hair. I say 'no, it's my best friend.'"

Her flower-child spirit reflects in her clothing that consists mostly bright colors with a mixture of earth tones. The color of her pants is forest green that makes one think of the environment, which makes sense because she recycles and likes to be eco-friendly. She once made a Halloween costume out of recycled plastic bags. She kitted the bags together to make a skirt and a scarf.

“When I talk on the phone, I talk and I knit,” she says as she paces the room. “When I’m at home and my husband is sleeping and I’m alone, I knit. Also, when I’m upstairs I knit and I stretch,” she says as she puts her right leg up on the filing cabinet. “As I knit, I exercise. But you don’t just want to do the right leg, you have to do the left leg too,” she says as she puts her left leg on the chair. “Oh. Oh. Oh. Also, I also knit here and stretch,” she says as she gets on the ground of her office and stretches her legs in a V. “Isn’t that fun?”

She often knits her own clothing with many colors. The colors of the clothing do not always coordinate. No matter. Sometimes she adds buttons and embellishments to what she’s wearing. She says that sometimes she will have a ripped sweater and will repair it herself. Her clothing may be a bit odd but it all seems to make sense to her.

Distinctive: See Angela Hammerli.

Erratic: acting, moving, or changing in ways that are not expected or usual; not consistent or regular. “Well, it’s kind of interesting because I teach first-aid. I don’t think I ever took a class in first aid. Wait, I have to show you something,” Hammerli says as she disappears into an office.

“Hopefully I can find it,” she calls from the office, the sound of crumpling paper mixing with her voice. “Alright, I don’t see it right now. I still have my book my daddy taught from in the 60s and 70s. I have been teaching first aid since 1973,” Hammerli explains.

There are ten CPR dummies on the floor in the front of the room. As her students begin to walk into her first-aid class, Hammerli picks up on a girl snapping her fingers and says, “Love the snapping. That’s cute.”

A boy moves his arms and she goes, “Do it again. The arms were great.” On this particular day, the students were demonstrating procedures done for CPR on the tan dummies.

“28, 29, 30,” the class says together.

The test dummies makes a bah boom, bah boom, bah boom rhythm as the students press down on them as if they were doing compressions. Hammerli puts her hands behind her back, dances around the room and taps her feet to the compressions as she instructs her students, “Good, look, listen, and feel.”

Often she will change her voice to one of a small child or sometimes refers to herself in second person.

“As a teacher, Mrs. Hammerli always keeps the class exciting, and I look forward to going to her class. She always wears something different, and she always has an interesting story to tell,” Gabrielle Theriot, a student in her first-aid class, says after class.

Legendary: Told about in a legend, very famous or well known.

Hammerli continues a legacy that her father started. Her Father George “Gee” Mitchell was the first physical education teacher at Nicholls from 1950 to 1972. He was also the first football coach at Nicholls in 1950. At the time, the name of the team was the Buccaneers, and it only lasted one season. After Hammerli and her husband Ed got married, they lived in Australia for a year for Ed’s job before they moved back to Thibodaux. In 1973 Hammerli started her job at Nicholls. “I’ve been at Nicholls for 40 years, and I’ll see if I can teach at Nicholls another 20 years,” Hammerli says. Hammerli grew up in Thibodaux. She can remember dancing in Shaver Gym when there was a stage before they tore it down and built the dance studio upstairs.

“I still have my little skirt and my little hat from when I was dancing in kindergarten,” Hammerli says in a child-like voice. Changing her voice back to her normal tone, she reminis-

cences: “And I remember when I was dancing, I turned around and my skirt fell down on the ground, but I had some other stuff under it. So it was ok.”

As a physical education teacher she has taught many activity classes but she is well known for her dance classes that she taught. In her earlier years she would often choreograph for the Nicholls Players and the Thibodaux Playhouse. “And sometimes when I choreographed I did it in my own way, but for some of the musicals you have to follow the instructions,” Hammerli says with a bubbly smile.

“I think my favorite class I’ve taught was the modern dance. I like to do a lot of different things like letters. The A, and C,” she says as she leans over and forms her body as if she were the letter C. “And if they would move their body with the letter like the letter T, tango,” she says as she positions her body into the letter T and moves her arms back in and begins to sway her body like a tango dancer.

“I think if people are studying, they fall asleep. If they are active, they wake-up,” Hammerli says.

Although Hammerli does not teach as many physical education classes as she once did, she has been the coordinator for the “Jubilee: A Festival of the Arts & Humanities,” for 16 years. The festival features and other events that have to do with arts and humanities such as cultural Cajun dancing, dancing and singing from foreign lands. “There used to be several events in one day, but now they have the events spread over six weeks,”

Hammerli explains.

The Jubilee

festival was started by Nicholls off of a series that Hammerli started called the Nicholls Artists and Lectures, an event where different artists would perform dance and teach dance. She wrote several grants to keep the program going.

Sometimes she will come back to school before the spring semester starts because she is the one who puts the entire festival together. She does not plan as many events as she used to, but she says she makes sure that all the dates fit together and the festival runs smoothly. “My two favorite parts of the jubilee are the Singers of the United Lands and the Swamp Stomp,” Hammerli explains. She houses, feeds and provides entertainment for the Singers of the United Lands. For the Swamp Stomp Festival of Cajun dancing, she enjoys taking her husband and dancing. Usually unique dancing. Angela Hammerli dancing.

“Whenever I dance with my husband, I always get three or seven compliments. I’m just a crazy and weird dancer. Some people just dance the same way, and they just do their feet the same way,” she says as she demonstrates a waltz and moves her feet around, “but I just use my body and I go down, I go up, I kick, I just do different things.”

Hammerli does not care who watches her dance and she dances quite often at festivals around Louisiana with her husband. Teachers at Nicholls who know her say that when there are faculty meetings she has been known dance across the room to her seat.

Now it is time to leave school. She gets back on her bike and heads toward Menard Street. She visits with all of the people waiting in line to pick up their children at St. Joseph Elementary School. Two policemen directing traffic when school lets out wave to her and she stops for a quick chat. Then she stops at her 90-year-old mother’s house and has a cup of coffee with her.

“Sometimes my mother speaks in Sicilian and I just think love all the time. I always say love you all the time, you’re great, or thank you. She says because we connect, we stay together, we’re Sicily,” Hammerli says. “Oh. Oh. Oh. And love oh la.”



BUSTIN' OUT

soft shell crabs

By: Kameryn Rome



During the night, an alarm rings to wake her up every two hours. Donna Rome is up to check on her babies. Nothing unusual there, except her babies. They aren't human. Her kids are crabs. That's right. Crabs. Rome sells soft-shell crabs for income and has to periodically check the crabs throughout the night during molting season for several reasons:

- » Unlike humans, crabs will eat each other depending on their molting stage.
- » Most of the crabs shed their shells at night.
- » It takes only two hours for the shell to harden.

Soft-shell crabs will grow to almost twice their size after they shed, Rome explains, and it is something that you would have to see to believe. After the crab has shed its shell, she discards them in the trash because, she says, "that's all it is. Just a shell."

The crabs she drags herself out of bed to check on are called "busters" because these crabs "bust out of their shells," which is often termed shedding or molting.

"It's something to see. When you look at it and you see that crab backing out of its shell, the crab actually grows," Rome says. "That's why it's busting out because the crab outgrows the shell."

A crab can molt 20 to 25 times in its life.

"When a crab is that small," Emile Breau, Rome's neighbor and fellow crabber, says as he puts his fingers an inch apart indicating the size of the crab, "the crab is steadily shedding maybe an inch at a time. They keep doing that until they get six or seven inches. They are steadily shedding from when they are a baby."

Rome catches all of the crabs from a freshwater lake near her house in Vacherie, Louisiana, with her husband Donnie Rome. On their boat they have:

Several crab traps in the back of the boat.

Bait in the back of the boat for the crab traps.

A rake attached to the side of the boat to pull the crab traps up.

A pan to sort the different crabs.

An ice chest to put the blue crabs in (sometimes referred to as green crabs).

Several different containers to put the buster crabs in.

The Romes put their crab traps out during the spring because the buster

crabs start to come out when the water gets warmer.

"There are certain times, mostly when it's hot, when you're going to catch more busters because they shed all the time in the lake," Rome explains. "Usually when the water is

warm, that's when you have more that will shed and become soft-shells."

The crabs start molting in March and molt through December.

The trap Rome uses to catch the crabs is a metal, red, square cage with several openings for the crab to get in. In the middle of the cage is a round cylinder called a "bait box" to put the bait in.

"The trap is called a four-funnel crab trap because there are four funnels for the crabs to get in. Once the crabs get in there, they can't get back out because they swim up," Rome says as she points to an opening on the trap.



PHOTO // BRICC BRACC

“And these two rings here, you see these two rings?” her husband, Donnie asks as he points to several small round openings on the cage. “That’s to let the little babies out. They have to be five inches point to point to be a legal crab. Except for a buster. A buster can be any size.”

Another distinct feature that can be seen on the trap is a tag. “All your crab cages have to have a tag on them with your license number and your name on it,” Rome says.

Hanging from the side of the cage is a round, red cork attached to a rope. “It stays up on the water and is going to hold that cage there,” says Rome.

The couple leaves the traps out on the lake for about three days, and when they return to check them, they use a rake attached to the side of the boat. The rake catches the cork and brings the cages up where Donnie is in the back of the boat.

“And when you are ready to take the crabs out, you open it here,” Donnie says as he pulls on a v-like bungee cord and the cage opens.

“You just open the cage up and you dump them in the pan to sort them,” Rome adds. “Sometimes, we may have a crab that has a red line or a pink line. I’ll pull the different crabs out and put them into separate boxes. You have separate the busters from the regular crabs.”

Rome likes to separate her crabs before she gets home because if she doesn’t, the crabs will sometimes eat each other. She saves the “regular green crabs” and peels them to sell the meat. She separates the buster crabs into two different piles that include the pink-line buster and the red-line buster.

“When looking for a buster crab, you ... look on the back fin of the crab for either a pink or a red line,” says Rome. If either is there, it’s a buster.

She explains that a pink-line buster will have a thin pink line along the inner border of the back fin, and this crab has about one week until it molts. A red-line buster has a thin red line along the inner boarder of the back fin, and this crab will molt in about three days.

Which brings us back to the morning wake-up calls. “The busters are little babies; you have to take care of them,” she says. “If you don’t catch it within two hours, it will turn back hard. Then it’ll be just like a regular crab,

and you’ll have to wait for it to start all over again.” So every night, she carefully checks each tank in her shed. The tank is about the standard size of a bathtub and sectioned off into three parts. Each section ranges from small to medium to large.

“I have one space for pink lines,” she says as she points to the largest portion of the tank. “The middle space is for the red lines, and then I have another space that we call the jail,” she explains as she points to the smallest slot. “This is where you put the crabs that are cracked in the back and getting ready to back out of their shell.”

“Once they back out of their shell, you pick them up, put them in Saran Wrap, put them in the freezer or take them, clean them and put them in your pot,” says Rome.

Rome explains her peeled blue crab meat, whether it’s white, dark, or mixed, sells for \$12 per pound. Depending on the year, that price could go up. For soft-shell crabs she sells them by the dozen:

- Large soft-shell crabs, \$30
- Medium soft-shell crabs, \$25
- Small soft-shell crabs, \$20

Rome doesn’t sell the crabs commercially but sells the crabs to loyal customers made up of family and friends.

On a good year Rome and her husband can make over \$6,000. “If it’s a bad year,” Rome explains, “we just don’t fish. Last year was a bad year.”

“If I ever got any problems, I ask my next door neighbor, Emile Breaux, and he helps me out with it,” says Donnie. “He built the tanks for me and all that. He knows a lot more about soft-shell crabs because he does that for a living.”



What is so unique about the tanks is that they are like an aquarium. Underneath the tank is another tank that’s filled up with shells and rocks that form bacteria. Water is pumped through this tank and into the one above that contains the crabs.

“I designed it to rotate the water so the bacteria can grow so the crabs can live,” says Breaux. “The water circulates through a sump tank and back into the pipes to keep the tanks for the crabs to live.”

“What I do for my tank is I start the system in the middle of March every year,” he explains as he points to his slightly larger tank with a few crabs in it. “I put two or three crabs in there just to get the bacteria started in the shells. The busters don’t really start coming out until the end of the month and beginning of April.”

The crabs that Breaux catches are in slightly brackish water compared to the ones the Romes catch in the lake. Though the lake that the Romes fish in is fresh water, Breaux explains that the crabs only lay their eggs in sand near the gulf in brackish water.

“A lot of people don’t know that crabs don’t reproduce near lakes. The crabs come to us,” Breaux says. “They don’t lay anywhere near the fresh water. They lay in saltwater and migrate this way.”

“What happens around late December and early January is all the female crabs are full of eggs,” Breaux explains.

“Around February the females will go onto the beach and lay their eggs. The female dies and all the babies starting in March will start migrating to us.”

When preparing a soft-shell crab to shed, it is best not to feed it because at this stage it is no longer eating, explains Breaux. “The reason he’s not eating is because he’s full and fat. So he’s got to come out that shell, and then when the crab is going to turn back hard, it eats.”

When Breaux started harvesting soft-shell crabs more than 25 years ago, he turned to Louisiana State University for technical support and his local friends who knew the techniques for crabbing.

“It’s a good living, but it’s a hard living. It ain’t easy, you know,” Breaux explains. “When you get those years that you make money and then you get those years that, you know . . . are flat-out tough. But then, Mother Nature lets it come back. You just got to stick with it.”

As a commercial fisherman, Breaux can make around \$30,000 for a good year. He sells the crabs that he catches to a crab dock in Des Allemands, or to his father, who owns B & C Seafood Market and Cajun Restaurant in Vacherie.

“The majority of the crabs I sell is at a crab dock. They can take a volume,” Breaux says. “Sometimes I’ll catch up to 1,500 pounds of crabs, but most of the time it’s under 1,000.”

The money he makes on selling the crabs depends on what the market is paying. It’s supply and demand. Breaux’s soft-shell crabs sell by the dozen: \$40 for large, \$35 for medium and \$30 for small.

Compared to Breaux, the Romes’ crabs are much smaller, and they don’t crab for a steady income like he does. “Right here it’s all junk crabs that we catch in the lake,” says Donnie, meaning they don’t catch many No. 1 and No. 2 crabs, the larger kind sold commercially to restaurants and seafood markets.

“We mostly catch what they call factory crabs. Picking crabs,” says Rome. “That’s why you gotta go somewhere else to catch the good crabs.”

For now, the crabs that they catch are good enough. Meanwhile Donna Rome will continue to get up every two hours to check on her crabs during the springtime. Like caring for a newborn baby, time passes and seasons change. Thankfully for Rome, it only happens for a short time period every year.