

# JERRY'S CRAB SHACK: ONE STAR

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Review: Jerry's Crab Shack

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After perusing this restaurant's website and reading the positive reviews on Yelp, my wife and I went to Jerry's Crab Shack this evening. We did not have a good experience. It was not "a home run," as another reviewer wrote. I don't know where these reviewers usually go to dinner, and I won't post the speculations I typed and then deleted because they were unflattering and, dare I say, so accurate as to be hurtful and it is not my intention to be hurtful. I simply want to correct the record.

I'm going to review Jerry's Crab Shack in a methodical, fair-minded manner so that other people who use this site, people like my wife and me, who are new to Baltimore and *rely* on this site to make informed dinner plans, can know what they are getting into and make their own decisions. If you are going to take the time to do something, as my dear wife says, do it right or don't bother, and let her do it like she does everything else (ha ha).

\*Location

Jerry's Crab Shack is near Fell's Point (not *in* historic Fell's Point, as their website says). In fact, the "shack," which is not a shack but a regular storefront wedged between a hair salon and a mattress store, is several blocks to the east, in a less-than-savory part of the neighborhood. If after reading this, you, future Yelp user, still plan to go to Jerry's Crab Shack, I would suggest that you do not park your car near Jerry's. Park in Fell's Point proper and walk. Even if you are mugged, the criminals will only take your wallet and not, as happened to us, your front right window (shattered), your Garmin navigation system, and five CDs, including a Smithsonian Folkways two-CD set, *Rhythms of Rapture: Sacred Musics of Haitian Vodou*, that you were looking forward to listening to on your commute.

### \*Décor

Jerry's seems all right when you first walk in. I said this review would be fair, and I meant it. Some people don't know how to separate their feelings about a thing from the thing itself, but I do. That is why I am willing to admit that even if *I* did not enjoy the sensation that is *Avatar* in 3-D, and even if *I* do not understand the appeal of jogging, they both have value independent of me. Just because hard-boiled eggs make everything in the refrigerator smell like hard-boiled eggs and that smell triggers my sensitive gag reflex, I understand why some people might feel differently and would want to eat them for breakfast every day. Different strokes, etc.

Jerry's commits to its nautical theme. The bar has charming fishing net draped above it, and caught in the net are plastic starfish and a cardboard mermaid. On the walls are pictures of sailboats, not framed but tacked to the plaster, the edges curled and yellowing as they might be in a more authentically briny atmosphere. At the end of the bar is a rubber crab, lovingly cuddled up to a Bud Light. A sign next to it says: "No One Feels Crabby with a Bud Light!" (You can definitely feel crabby with a Bud Light. I would argue, considering all the better beers out there in the world, that you *should* feel crabby with a Bud Light. I would also say that since the staff of Jerry's Crab Shack seems so invested in their status as "native"

Baltimoreans, they might consider supporting Maryland businesses and serving only local beers.)

There are eight tables, covered with laminated red-and-white-check tablecloths. Ours had holes in it, through which you can feel the soft white polyester fuzz. We were expecting more of a “restaurant restaurant” (my wife’s words), and less of a “bar with some tables” (also my wife). The pictures on the website do *not* accurately reflect the interior, so this was not my fault. I was lead to expect more of a nautical bistro atmosphere, which my wife later insisted was “not a thing.” The point is, I promised my wife a special dinner. I told her this place would be “quintessentially Baltimore.” I hoped that we would finally be able to unwind and enjoy an evening out of the house, away from the half unpacked boxes and nearly empty rooms.

## \*Cleanliness

Not the cleanest.

While waiting to be seated (before we realized this was more of a seat-yourself establishment), I watched my wife lift her heel, up and down, again and again, testing the fly-strip stickiness of the floor. Her face got that set look I recognize. *It’s so authentic*, I said, hoping to cut off any potential negativity at the pass. (I was noticing and appreciating the already-mentioned netting as well as the bathroom doors labeled Pirate and Lady Pirate, which I found very egalitarian.) Janet—my wife’s name is Janet—can get it in her head to not like a thing and then there is no changing her mind. The woman could be unhappy at her own birthday party (which she has been, multiple times). So the place wasn’t the cleanest! I would think that with the word shack in the title, you’d have been forewarned.

The floor could use a mop. They could stand to “swab the decks.” But our table was wiped down, and we did not see any cockroaches. My wife would say that that is a low bar to set for cleanliness, so I will also add that I saw a sign saying they had passed their health inspection and that that sign was hung prominently in the window, where it is legally required to be.

## \*Service

Service was, at first, fine. A woman too old to be wearing a pirate wench costume welcomed us and took our order—two softshell crab sandwiches (according to Yelp, their “star” dish) and a side of slaw. Her wench bodice (though maybe I should say Lady Pirate bodice) was black faux leather and her breasts overfilled it, not the way young breasts do, pushing plumply up and over, but like balloons that have begun to lose some helium, balloons three days after the party.

(I want to pause here a moment and say that I do not normally complain about restaurant service. As the child of a father who complained, loudly and ad nauseam, about slow waitresses, unfriendly waitresses, slutty waitresses, indeed, as a boy too often embarrassed by the impatience and insensitivity of an authority figure, I usually take a bit of bad service on the chin. Waitresses are people too, and not every meal I eat has to be the best I’ve ever eaten. I’ve choked down a few dinners in my life and kept my mouth shut about it. My wife is perhaps a little less forgiving, a little prone to complain when food comes out cold or I forget to buy milk at the store even when I promised I would remember, but she really only complains when it is warranted. She does not let people “walk all over her,” and I “shouldn’t either.” What happened tonight was not the waitress’s fault. I don’t know what my father expects. Waitresses are not wizards. All I expect from them is the transportation of food from one point to a different point, and they don’t even need to smile because what in the hell is there to smile about when you are working as a waitress at Jerry’s Crab Shack and your manager has you stuffed into a corset two sizes too small and you have three kids at home and corns on your feet and two people in their DC-black suits sit down in your section and one of them asks whether the crabs are locally sourced, which of course they are, which is why that woman looked at us like we were morons and clearly not from around here even though we are now local homeowners.)

Food took forty-five minutes. Or, rather, I should say: after forty-five minutes, things at the table had become tense. We were both tired and very hungry. Moving is a lot of work. There have been more than a few nights

spent eating leftover pizza on the floor because the new table we ordered online is stuck in a warehouse in St. Louis and even when my wife called the company and used her most terrifying voice they told her that we would have to wait, that they were working on it. We had both been looking forward to this dinner.

*Are they sending someone out to catch the crabs first?* Janet said, and I knew she was about to stand up and ask where our food was. So I got up first, to avoid making a scene. I hate drama in restaurants. I hate it a lot. I may have snapped at Janet before going over to the bar, but that was kind of on her, since she knows how much I hate when people bother waitresses.

(You know, Janet has a lot of good qualities. I want to say that right now. This is not a review of my wife.)

If this were a review of my wife, I might review her based on:

1. Supportiveness
2. Empathy
3. Stability
4. Sense of humor
5. Physical appearance
6. Tolerance for me

Janet is supportive. When I wanted to go to graduate school for a masters in musicology, she said I should do it, and then she paid for it even though we weren't married yet. (Janet is a lawyer.) I think supporting her then-long term boyfriend's masters in musicology also speaks to her empathy, because when you tell people you are a musicologist they mostly look at you like you are insane or you made up your job. She did not do that. She loves that I love music and that I work for Smithsonian Folkways, which is my dream job, and so what if I now live an hour-and-a-half commute away from that dream job and can't go out with coworkers after work because she wants to own a house, which we can't afford to do in DC, and have children.

Obviously, I want those things too.

Janet is very stable. You could call her a boulder. A flat-bottomed boulder. Not that she has a flat bottom. (Rating her on attractiveness I give her a 10++.) What I mean is, you couldn't roll her down a hill or something because she isn't that type of boulder. When she says she is going to do something, she does it. If she had said we were going to a nice restaurant, we would have shown up at Jerry's to discover white linens and locally sourced cocktail bitters. Sometimes I think she simply wills things into being with the force of her mind.

She also has a wonderful sense of humor. When we walked into Jerry's Crab Shack and she saw the rubber crab, she smiled.

The only item about which I might have anything at all negative to say would be number 6) Tolerance for me, and really only tolerance for me lately. She is "all in" about our move to Baltimore. If I "had doubts," I should have "said something before we *bought* the goddamn house and moved all our shit up here." I don't disagree with that. She just doesn't see that I am both all in, in the sense that I am sure she knows what's best, and not all in, in the sense that I am not sure what will happen next or that I'll like it.

### \*Service (bar)

And here we get to the crux of the issue. I don't know where Jerry hires his bar staff, but they are the rudest, most unpleasant people on the face of the earth.

I walked over to the bar and asked the bartender, politely, when our food might be ready. And this bartender, someone obviously on work release from a local prison, or recently kicked out of his biker gang for being too obnoxious, tells me it'll *be ready when it's ready*. Then, he rather grudgingly looked over at the order-up window and said, *soon probably*. I realize that doesn't sound so bad. In retrospect, it seems pretty reasonable. But I could not go back to the table and tell Janet that the food would be out "soon probably." I needed a timetable. Or a reason the food was being so

slow. A kitchen fire, a death in the chef's family, a sudden crab shortage sweeping the Chesapeake. I had already screwed up dinner. I was going to be assertive. This was the one thing I could do right for her. So I said, *Can you go back and check? Or find our waitress?* And he said, *I've got a bar to tend, dude. Unless you want a drink, I got other customers to worry about.* The other men at the bar were starting to look at me. I could see them judging me, for my suit and the way I hold myself, which I know is a little awkward. I have unusually long arms. I said, *This is simply unacceptable,* again, not because I felt that it was that unacceptable but because I wanted to make Janet happy. I think I asked to speak to Jerry. My voice may have gone up in volume. That was when the bartender said that *I should sit the fuck down in my faggy DC suit and wait like everyone else.* The other men sitting at the bar laughed that rumbling masculine chuckle, as if something funny had happened, and they laughed again when the bartender accused me of "blushing." I did not say anything back because there isn't anything to say to that kind of behavior. I absolutely do not regret not saying anything at that moment and simply walking back to my table.

I don't know what people in this city have against DC. Not everyone from DC is an asshole. And I'm not even from DC. I'm from Ohio.

It feels good to have gotten that off my chest. I don't want to lie to you, future Yelp reader. I feel like we are connecting, really unburdening ourselves. I'll tell you a few more things. I am drinking a beer right now, my third, and it is only just beginning to help. My wife went to sleep hours ago. I am sitting with my computer, the empty bottles, and a little lamp on the wooden floor of what will be the living room because I don't have a desk yet and I don't want to go upstairs. This isn't where I hoped I would be. I was hoping to have "an extra special" night. And by *extra special*, I mean I hoped I would be having sex. There, I said it. I don't have a problem talking about natural acts between a man and his wife. Unlike the bartender, I am not so insecure about my sexuality that I have to resort to inappropriate homophobic name-calling. It did not make me feel good to be called "faggy" in front of my wife. It made me feel shitty. I do not like that bartender's comment repeating in my head.

I actually do have a problem talking about sex sometimes. I could say that I used a euphemism for sex because I didn't want to shock more conservative Yelp users by talking about the beast with two backs, but the truth is, there are moments (like right now) when being a person in a body seems impossible. All the parts working in chorus, repetitive involuntary rhythms, a near miracle of coordination. Bodies are strange, so fleshy and pierceable. Sometimes when I am on my endless commute I think about the parts of my car which, in an accident, would be most likely to run me through. The steering column. The parking brake. A shard from the other car. I don't like to think about how thin a membrane my skin actually is, but once I get it in my head, it's hard to get it out. This is why I am upset about the loss of my CDs.

Have you ever listened to Haitian Vodou music? It's not what you would expect. A low patter of rain beat out on the drum. The song a chant, one woman leading, the village following. Call and response. They invite the spirits to come and ride them. But in the end, it's the music that rides you.

I don't know how I got here.

Janet has an outie belly button. It's cute, like a little pigtail on her stomach. She hates it. And she doesn't like when I touch it. She says it "feels weird," as if I am poking a sensitive cord that sends shocks to a place in her body she can't name, a secret nestling between her uterus and stomach. It is hard to fuck someone and not rub up against their outie belly-button. Also, because I know I can't touch it, sometimes touching it is the only thing I can think about.

Janet doesn't use sites like Yelp. She isn't like me and you. She doesn't trust random people's opinions. She reads food critics, peruses "Best of" lists. Since we moved here, she has started to read the *Baltimore Sun*. She does her research and she has high standards. I like this about her.

If Janet were reviewing me, I wonder what criteria she would use. I think she would say that I make her laugh. I think she would say she finds me handsome instead of saying that I *am* handsome. I think she would use the word "frustrated" and bring up small things: taking out the trash, removing expired food from the refrigerator, planning dates. I hope she would say that



I am loyal and that she would rank that quality above all others, because I think it's the best one I have. I think if she understood that, she'd see why I didn't raise a fuss about moving here, why I go along with her when maybe I should speak up. I worry that perhaps she likes this quality in me least of all.

### \*Food

We left after the incident at the bar. When I sat back down, neither of us said anything. We waited five minutes. I hoped she would make a scene, which I have never hoped for before in a restaurant, but she just twisted her napkin in silence. I said I thought we should call it a night and we picked up Wendy's on the way home and ate it in the car. So I cannot speak to the quality of the food at Jerry's Crab Shack. If it is truly the best softshell crab in the city, then we will never eat the best softshell crab in the city. We will always settle for second best, and probably not even know the difference.