

# Maine Lobster Rolls Rise from Humble Beginnings to Restaurant Menu Favorite

by Valerie Marier

Maine's favorite sandwich first gained national éclat in 2006 when *Bon Appetit* declared it "the dish of the year." Foodies took even more note when, three years later, it graced the cover of *Gourmet* magazine. Overnight, "our" crustacean concoction headlined menus from Massachusetts to Florida.

With all due respect to these Johnny-come-lately bibles of gastronomy, lobster rolls have been a Pine Tree state staple for decades.

"We've been serving lobster rolls since 1973," said Ashley Padget of Alison's Restaurant in Kennebunkport's Dock Square. "In fact, this year, in one month alone, from June

27 to July 27, we sold 6237 lobster rolls."

Whether eaten at the beach or on the back deck, at a food shack near the ocean or on a river dock at high tide, even at an upscale Ogunquit restaurant with white linen tablecloths, lobster rolls are Maine's culinary crown jewel. For certain, not many self-respecting Mainers would even THINK of ordering one in Hackensack, New Jersey.

Lobster rolls are the de rigeur welcoming meal for visiting relatives and out-of-state guests. One area businessman, who frequently travels overseas, declares he "won't leave Logan Airport for a long flight without having a lobster roll first."

Truthfully, no one knows the exact moment a Downeast lobsterman's wife slathered a piece of white bread with mayo, slapped on leftover tail meat, and labeled it lunch. Even the words "lobster roll" didn't appear in print until 1937 in *The New York Times*.

Most Mainers credit Bayley's Lobster Pound at Pine Point in Scarborough as the provenance for this famous sandwich. Those "from away" insist the lobster roll was created by Harry Perry at his Milford, Connecticut restaurant in the 1920s.

Keep in mind, however, that the Connecticut version featured lobster meat sautéed in hot butter, which is not the protocol for traditional Maine lobster rolls.

Tongues have also wagged forever as to what ingredients make the tastiest lobster roll. There's



Stephanie Nadeau, owner of Ocean Roll, swears by a top-split hot dog roll with crustless sides on the lobster rolls served at her food truck.



hardly a cook from Kittery to Skowhegan who hasn't sampled a neighbor's "secret" recipe at one point, and wondered, "What's she got in there?"

The best recipes always start with fresh lobster meat, "sea to table," as it were.

Barnacle Billy's in Perkins Cove, which typi-

cally sells 300 lobster rolls on a busy July Saturday, hasn't changed its recipe in 56 years.

sauce. We are traditional and don't dabble with other stuff, like that Connecticut roll."

Manager Stu says, "We use three parts of the lobster — the tail, the claws and the knuckles. A lot of other restaurants don't do that. Then we add a little chopped celery, and a dab of mayo and horse radish

At the Cape Pier Chowder House in Cape Porpoise, Wanda Daggett's long-standing recipe showcases 3.5 ounces of lobster meat per roll. She adds one other ingredient. "I go light on the Hellman's, and only Hellman's real mayonnaise — by eye. Nothing else."

Some cooks enhance the 3.5 to 5-ounces of lobster meat that go into a roll with a dash of lemon juice. Oth-

**Lobster Rolls** — continued on page 31



Cape Pier Chowder House offers views of Cape Porpoise harbor, the ideal setting for enjoying a lobster roll stuffed with fresh Maine lobster.

## Lobster Rolls

*continued from page 30*

ers add a dollop of smoked bacon mayonnaise, a sprinkling of chopped chives, even a hefty tablespoon of Stonewall Kitchen's Lemon Herb Aioli. Then there are those who top the roll with smoked paprika or celery salt.

"And you never shred the lobster, like they do with tuna," says Wanda Daggett. "It's gotta be in nice chunks."

Hands down, the preferred lobster roll bun is a New England-style top-split hot dog roll with crustless sides. "It would be blasphemous if we used a different roll," says Stephanie Nadeau, owner of Ocean Roll, the red food truck on Route 1 just north of Han-

naford Supermarket in Kennebunk.

As for prepping the roll, every chef consulted for this article agreed with Kathy Gunst, noted chef and author of 14 popular cookbooks, including *Soup Swap*.

G u n s t says, "The hot dog roll MUST be toasted in butter to give it a good golden brown crusty exterior and a soft interior."

Size doesn't matter. At Alisons, Padgett says, "We serve a sampler platter of three small lobster rolls and also an extra-large eight-inch roll. Both are popular with our



Ashley Padgett of Alisson's, in Dock Square, Kennebunkport, says they sold over 6000 lobster rolls in a recent month.

customers. We also offer gluten free."

And all sides agree that there are many favored side dishes to enhance the lobster roll. Without a doubt, the most popular side? Potato chips.

Kathy Gunst suggests that "making the chips from scratch is preferable." Others insist they'll only eat Cape Cod Potato Chips or "some killer Torres chips" with their rolls. Cole slaw, French fries and dill pickles are

other favored choices.

Pressed as to his recommendation for a favorite side dish, the manager of Barnacle Billy's said, "Honestly? A rum punch. But actually, chowder is the best. They just go together." Adds Wanda Daggett, "Oh my God, yes, clam chowder."

"Our customers seem to prefer chips and slaw, and most of them want to eat them at our picnic tables," Ocean Roll's Nadeau said. But perhaps the most telling answer came from a 15-year-old tourist sitting at one of Nadeau's tables. When asked his favorite side dish, he said, "Another lobster roll."



Barnacle Billy's in Perkins Cove typically sells 300 lobster rolls on a busy July Saturday. They haven't changed their recipe in 56 years.