THE DEFINITIVE
ORAL HISTORY
of the
LOBSTER
ROLL

IT WASN’T ALWAYS MAINE’S MARQUEE FOODSTUFF. HOW DID A HUMBLE HOT DOG BUN CRAMMED WITH THE SIMPLEST OF INGREDIENTS MANAGE TO ATTAIN ROCKSTAR STATUS IN THE FOOD WORLD? WE TALKED TO THE SEAFOOD SLINGERS, CHEFS, GLOSSY FOOD-MAG WRITERS, AND ENTREPRENEURS WHO HELPED TURN THE UNASSUMING LOBSTER ROLL INTO A NATIONAL PHENOMENON.

BY BRIAN KEVIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NINA GALLANT
STYLED BY MONICA MARIANO
The lobster roll,” one travel writer recently pushed, “is as closely tied to Maine’s identity as the crab cake is to Baltimore or the cheesesteak to Philly.”

Seems like that’s always been true, right? After all, Maine’s beloved crustacean—a bun inspires fiddle-pilgrimages, grace magazine covers, and prompts traffic jams in tourist season. But only a few decades back, the lobster roll was just another obscure seafood-shack menu item, no more renowned or emblematic of the Pine Tree State than, say, fried scallops or a bowl of steamers. Delicieux! Of course! Nationally beloved? Hardly.

So what’s it take to become a new classic? We posed the question to dozens of chefs, seafood-stand owners, magazine editors, historians, and big-city entrepreneurs who witnessed (and helped fuel) the rise of one of our favorite morsels.

A hundred years ago, nobody had even heard of a lobster roll—not even in Maine. According to John F. Mariani’s revered *Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink*, the phrase first appeared in print in *The New York Times* in 1937, and Mariani name-checks possible progenitor restaurants in Milford, Connecticut, and Long Island, New York (though our chats with lobster roll cognoscenti suggest there’s more to the story).

For most of the 20th century, a smattering of New England restaurateurs hawked the dish in relative obscurity. Then, at the tail end of the ’90s, eager chefs, hyper-productive Maine fishermen, and savvy New York editors took over from relative obscurity. Then, at the tail end of the ’90s, a tiny restaurant in Manhattan, Pearl Oyster Bar, transformed the once-humble lobster roll into an object of culinary obsession—and a fleet of restaurants in Milford, Connecticut, and Long Island, New York (though our chats with lobster roll cognoscenti suggest there’s more to the story).

Today, perhaps a century after its debut, young chefs and entrepreneurs are pushing the lobster roll’s geographic and conceptual horizons. Put on your bib and enjoy the anything-but-as Maine’s quintessential dish.

For brevity and clarity, some portions of these quotes have been condensed.
my mom says, growing up, lobster-shack culture didn't spring up until the '50s, when Dad went to another restaurant and had a lobster roll, playing cribbage and waiting for customers. Then, in the late '80s to buy Red's?" Dad and I used to sit at the window, playing and I remember so many merchants going, "Why do you want to be a deputy editor of Bon Appétit (Cumberland native, special projects and Marketing Collaborative): It'd be hard to disprove anyone who always been around. II. "What’s a Lobster Roll?"

NANCY HARMON JENKINS (Camed–based food writer): My father, who was born in Machias in 1910, told me he didn’t remember seeing lobster rolls before WWII, that it was a post-war thing. I was surprised at that, because I thought it had something to do with an egg roll. It’s funny because now, in the last 10 or 15 years, nobody asks that question anymore.

MARIANNE LACROIX (marketing director at the Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative): It’s hard to disprove anyone who claims to be the first — it’s pretty murky back there.

JASPER WHITE (chef/owner of Summer Shack in Kennebunk): I remember seeing 84 lobster rolls in a day was a record in my first year, 16 years ago. Our record now is 902. We feed way more people, but it just doesn’t seem to be slowing down, and it seems like every restaurant in Maine has one now. Rebecca Charles gets a lot of credit for that — she was on the cutting edge of the casual oyster bar thing in New York City, before it became chic.

HARMON JENKINS: It was partly Rebecca Charles. It was partly Jasper White. JASPER WHITE: (chef/owner of Summer Shack in Boston, author of the cookbook: Lobster at Home): I might have been the first chef to do a lobster roll on an airline menu. In the ’80s, I had a fine dining restaurant, Jasper's, and I introduced a lobster roll on our summer menu. I had to dress it up, which is kind of what I did with New England cooking back then. I did a saffron New England bun, homemade beet pickles, and homemade fancy potato chips. It surprised me later when it became so popular in New York — and once it hit there, it just became a national craze.

III. “Oh, This Thing from Maine Is Now in New York.”

CHARLES: I was in New York City cooking in the ’70s, and it was a drug-infested carnival way to live. A few years of that and I was like, oh my god, I’m not going to make it to 30. So when mom bought a house in Kennebunk in 1979, I thought, why don’t I just move up there? We had a long history of coming to Kennebunk — there are pictures of me at Kennebunk Beach at 21 months, lying on my stomach and smiling. I wound up working at the Whistling Oyster, and from there I went to the White Barn Inn and a little restaurant I opened called Café 74, which only lasted about a year. I lived in Kennebunk until about ’87, when I went back to the city. By 1996, I was sick of taking chef jobs for New York restaurant owners who didn’t know anything about the restaurant business. I went to Napa to take a breather, and I asked the chef on the plane about this place, Swan Oyster Depot in San Francisco. Right off the plane, I went, and they just had oysters and San Francisco–style seafood. Very simple, a bunch of guys working behind a counter, serving fish out the front window. I thought, oh my god, this is fantastic — we don’t have anything like this in New York! I got back and started looking for a small space. I thought, they’re doing San Francisco style — okay, I’ll do New England style.

DESIMON: When I moved to New York in 1995, the only lobster roll I remember was kind of a fancy version at Grand Central Oyster Bar. Other than that, you couldn’t find them. When Pearl Oyster Bar opened [in 1997], that was the first moment of, “Oh, this thing from Maine is now in New York.”

LАНGARTEN: Rebecca Charles' whole schtick — it was more than schtick, it was the brilliant thing she did — was to elevate this fishermen’s food, and she was brilliant enough not to overcomplicate things.

IV. “And Then It Just Went Viral.”

LАНGARTEN: This could be a myth at this point, but I’m pretty sure Rebecca Charles was on the cover of Gourmet or Bon Appetit or one of these with a lobster roll. After that, Martha Stewart jumped on, and everyone and their brother was making lobster rolls on television, and it’s showing up in magazines. It became an icon of summertime.

KINGSTON: For us, the first real breakout one was USA Today in 2000. They did “10 Plates from 50 States” — they chose our lobster roll as one of the best. They chose a lobster roll, and they chose The Clam Shack.

GAGNON: Back in 1995, CBS Sunday Morning, with Tim Sample, that was the first national press that I remember. And CHARLES: It was a very small space — it started out with 21 seats, bar and counter seating and one table that was bitterly fought over. I spent the longest time searching for buns and trying to get bakers to make them, then realized that the Pepperidge Farm bun I put my hot dog in is so much better than any of this, so I just went with that. And for me, it’s a sandwich that has to have store-bought mayonnaise. When I serve a bouillabaisse, I’m making the mayonnaise, but when I serve a lobster roll, it’s Hellmann’s.

It’s a sandwich that has to have store-bought mayonnaise. When I serve bouillabaisse, I’m making the bouillabaisse, the mayo, but when I serve a lobster roll, it’s Hellmann’s. have the famous split-top version — you can toast them, flatten them, open them up a bit, and dump your salad on top.

BAYLEY CLOUGH: In the years after they discovered the split-top hot dog roll, my great-grandmother switched over, because it’s just become a hit there, it just became a national craze.
then it just went viral – the Food Network, even Nippon Television in Japan.

KINGSTON: We were in a Travel + Leisure article in 2003 or 2004, and the interviewer said, “It’d be cool if you could get the makings of this thing and have them shipped to you.” Well I said, we could do that. Lo and behold, she put in a sidebar like, “Get the makings for your Maine lobster roll from The Clam Shack!” I didn’t even have a FedEx account. So subscribers get this magazine, the phone starts ringing, and I have a market manager saying, “Steve, I just got my third phone call for a lobster roll kit. What are these people talking about?” I went, “Oh shit! Are you kidding me? Take the order! Take the phone number!” Suddenly we were selling the Maine Lobster Roll Kit, and we just crushed it that first summer with orders, all from one article.

HARMON JENKINS: The key to the whole thing is New York because that’s where the magazine editors are, and you can’t get anything past them unless it’s in New York – then it becomes a big deal. Then everybody in the country wants it.

RUTH REICHL (editor of Gourmet from 1999 to 2009): I wish I could tell you about the conversations that went into choosing a lobster roll for the cover of the magazine [in July of 2009]. I would like to think I never had that much hubris that I would think, “Yeah, we’re going to make X dish famous.” Certainly, at Gourmet, we wouldn’t say of a particular dish, you know, “Tikka masala needs to be famous!”

FAIRCHILD: But so many people come to New York as a tourist destination that once a dish is sort of on the “must-have list,” people come from all over to eat it, then they go home and tell their friends. Hence the Cronut [a croissant-doughnut hybrid that New Yorkers have lined up for since 2013]. Once the word gets out, a dish spreads its tentacles all across the country: the pastrami sandwich at Carnegie Deli, the Cronut, the Pearl Oyster Bar lobster roll.

V. “Suddenly, They Were All Over the Place.”

REICHL: When Rebecca Charles opened up Pearl, nobody was eating lobster rolls. Then suddenly, they were all over the place. And certainly the fact that lobsters got cheap was a big factor in the growing popularity of it.

LACROIX: Historically, [Maine lobstermen] were catching 20–25 million pounds a year, and that started going up. In the early 2000s, you’re looking at maybe 60 million pounds coming in. There’s a lot of speculation as to why: the industry has been managing the resource since the 1800s, so there are a lot of sustainability measures in place. Cod were overfished and the cod fishery went down – those were considered a predator, so that’s a factor. Processing was also becoming more popular. Back in the ’90s, lobster was more of a white-tablecloth item, and surf and turf – a piece of steak and a lobster tail – was big. And it was sort of like, “All right, now what are we going to do with all this claw and knuckle meat?”

DESIMON: I’m guessing [New York restaurants] use quite a bit of picked lobster meat, because almost no one in a New York kitchen – other than, say, Pearl – is steaming the lobsters and picking the meat themselves.

CHARLES: That’s what’s wrong with most lobster rolls. We get all of the lobster into that tiny restaurant to the tune of 1,500 pounds a week, and we steam it all in-house, throw it into ice-water baths. We break it down, we pick it, we cut it. We have a very specific methodology.

It was only a couple of months before other restaurateurs were coming with cameras and pads, trying to determine what was in the Pearl lobster roll. I’ve learned the hard way that people can copy you right down to the exact way you do everything, and there’s not a lot you can do about it.

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES: “Do not invite Rebecca Charles and Mary Redding to the same clambake. They opened the snug but sparkling Pearl Oyster Bar together in Greenwich Village in 1997, but bitterly dissolved their partnership, with Ms. Charles retaining sole ownership of Pearl. Ms. Redding then opened her own...
place, Mary’s Fish Camp, a few blocks away, offering virtually the same menu of New England–inspired seafood.” (“A Rivalry Fought Out In Dueling Lobster Rolls,” by Eric Asimov; May 23, 2001)

“The owner and chef of a Greenwich Village seafood restaurant has settled the lawsuit she brought against her former sous-chef after he opened a restaurant that she said was a ‘total plagiarism’ of her own. The chef, Rebecca Charles of Pearl Oyster Bar, had accused her former assistant, Edward McFarland, of copying ‘each and every element’ of her restaurant.” (“Chef’s Lawsuit Against a Former Assistant Is Settled Out of Court,” by Pete Wells; April 19, 2008)

BEN SARGENT (aka “Dr. Klaw” of Brooklyn’s short-lived Underground Lobster Pound, former restaurateur, host of the Cooking Channel’s Hook, Line & Dinner from 2011 to 2013): What started to happen was that people were just riffing off of Rebecca Charles. And I was like, no! Go on a trip to Maine, because even hers is her own version! It was chef-y chefs who’d never left New York City. They were over-garnishing, and they were putting so much lobster in the roll that they no longer understood the concept, because the point is the ratio of buttery toasted bun to succulent lobster.

So I woke up one day [in early 2010] and was like, I’m going to make a lobster roll in my Brooklyn apartment and show these guys what a lobster roll is all about. It was all run by text message, all word-of-mouth. I’d operate from dark until about 1 in the morning. I had to operate under the name “Dr. Klaw” because I needed an alias. And it worked, for a while, which was crazy. I was having people down to my teeny tiny apartment and selling 250 lobster rolls a night [with Maine-sourced lobster].

I got kind of a slap on the wrist from the fire department – they said I had enough propane in my apartment to blow up a city block – and eventually, the health department sent a notice to me and to my landlord: “Benjamin F.W. Sargent, dba ‘The Lobster Pusher Man,’ operating as ‘Dr. Klaw.’” They threatened me with jail time.

MICHAEL CIMARUSTI (chef/owner at Providence, Connie and Ted’s, and Cape Seafood & Provisions in Los Angeles): Maybe there were places in LA that did lobster rolls every once in a while, but only five or six years ago did you start seeing them here more often. At Connie and Ted’s [opened in 2013], we’ll get anywhere between 700 and 900 pounds of whole lobster throughout the week, specifically for the lobster roll. It can account for as much as 20 percent of the entree sales in any given day.

SABIN LOMAC (Scarborough native, co-founder and co-owner of the national, Los Angeles–based Cousins Maine Lobster chain of food trucks): When we first started doing this [in 2012], we weren’t sure that people in LA even knew what a lobster roll was.

JIM TSELIKIS (Cape Elizabeth native, co-founder and co-owner of Cousins Maine Lobster): We thought about doing Italian sandwiches, but we kept coming back to lobster, because that’s our identity and our tradition. It was going
to be a passion project, maybe break even. Then we had lines 50 people deep on day one, and [ABC’s reality TV show] Shark Tank reached out to us the night before we’d even served a roll. [“Shark” Barbara Corcoran, of the show’s investor panel, bought 15% of the company for $55,000.]

LOMAC: We were astounded by how many people were driving 30, 40, 50 miles for a lobster roll. We had a guy drive from Phoenix one time. We just opened in San Antonio [the company’s 13th city and 19th truck], and there were people there, especially wayward New Englanders, who were genuinely grateful.

LUKE HOLDEN (Cape Elizabeth native, founder and CEO of the national Luke’s Lobster chain): My father had the very first lobster-processing license in the state of Maine, 30-plus years ago, so that was the business I grew up in, whether it was on the docks or the processing facility. I wanted to be on the water, so I got a job as a sternman, right in Kettle Cove in Cape Elizabeth. I learned how to fish there.

We opened in 2009, building on the lobster roll’s momentum in NYC. The question was, why are all these incredible chefs screwing this thing up so badly? We cut out the middleman and brought the product to urban environments in a fast-casual fare that didn’t exist. We’re at 26 locations now. We’re comfortable growing five to eight shacks a year in the next five to seven years, which puts us hopefully somewhere around 75 shacks domestically, across the U.S.

LACROIX: These guys [Luke’s and Cousins] are doing an amazing job. Both of them are also selling a story, which I think people really like right now, to know where their food is coming from and the story behind it.

JANE STERN (co-author of Roadfood): Can I be a contrarian? We’ve spent the better part of four decades preaching that the glory of American food done correctly is not
just food on a plate but the ambience and gestalt. How anyone can replicate sitting on the end of a pier in Maine – with the gray Atlantic waters splashing against the wooden pillars and the salty air and the Down East accents – to eating it out of a truck in Des Moines is ridiculous to me.

VI. “Now Everybody Has to Differentiate Their Lobster Roll with What They Do That’s Special.”

BAYLEY CLOUGH: Going back to the 1970s, when people came in for lobster rolls and brought friends from out of state, they would talk about it like this special thing they couldn’t get anywhere else. “I couldn’t wait to get back to Maine to get a lobster roll!” We don’t have that anymore because you can get a lobster roll anywhere in the country – they have them at McDonald’s, for goodness sake. So now everybody has to differentiate their lobster roll with what they do that’s special.

KARL SUTTON (co-owner of Bite Into Maine food truck at Fort Williams in Cape Elizabeth): We were genuinely surprised [before opening in 2011] that everyone just used the Maine style, with some mayo, and there didn’t seem to be a lot of variation. We were like, what are we missing? So we did some tastings and experiments with different flavor combinations that we thought paired well with the lobster, and that became the impetus and inspiration to open a food truck [which now serves curry-, chipotle-, and wasabi-style rolls, alongside the classics].
SARAH SUTTON (co-owner of Bite Into Maine): We definitely sell more traditional ones, but in the beginning, we were on the news, and then all of a sudden, we started getting these really old Mainers who were like, “I want a curry lobster roll!” because the TV reporter said they were good.

BAXTER KEY (co-founder/co-owner of The Highroller Lobster Co. food cart in Portland): We serve a lot of first-timers, people on vacation doing the beer circuit here, and they’re like, “I’ve never had a lobster roll. How should I do it?” I’ll say, I like it with bacon and jalapeño mayo. And they’re always stoked about it.

ANDY GERRY (co-founder/co-owner of The Highroller): We knew at first people would be skeptical because we were messing with a classic.

KEY: There are definitely people with their opinions. We’ll post a picture with, like, avocado and lime mayo, and people are like, “What are you doing?! You can’t even taste the lobster!” in the comments section.

FAIRCHILD: It’s one of those things like a well-made burger or club sandwich, those kinds of iconic dishes that never go out of style but also can adapt to modern eating. I daresay somewhere in this country, there’s probably a lobster roll that has some kind of Asian seasoning or maybe some kind of South American or Latin seasoning. And it doesn’t suffer. It’s enhanced by reinterpretation, and I think that’s why it endures.

JANE STERN: I think lobster rolls are totally minimalist cuisine. I remember watching Gordon Ramsay on TV about a year ago, showing how to make a lobster roll. It was a complete nightmare, because he had all this weird seasoning in it – thyme and I don’t know what else. He wanted to make it interesting and chef-ish, but the best lobster roll depends only on the perfection
of the lobster, how recently it was caught, how good it is – then butter and a roll.

CIMARUSTI: It’s got to just be an exercise in purity.

CHARLES: When you elevate something, for me, you have to be careful not to take it somewhere else: somebody puts seaweed in it, someone else puts tarragon in it. You just – you can’t do that. You have to keep it pure. Most people’s biggest complaint about my lobster roll is that it’s got too much mayonnaise. Well, I love mayonnaise, and I don’t trust people who don’t.

KINGSTON: I actually like those places that do some funky stuff. Questions about our round rolls used to really bother me – fortunately for us, the reputation of the product outgrew the skepticism.

WHITE: It’s so hard to be a young chef now, because you just have to come up with nonsense to get noticed. I did one change: some of the old classic lobster rolls have celery, but instead I do a small amount of chives in the mayonnaise and cucumbers, which give it that little bit of crunch and texture.

DESIMON: All you need is butter, a split-top hot dog bun, a lobster, and mayonnaise. And if you want a little bit of celery or something, go for it. You shouldn’t. But whatever, you can.

SARGENT: If you put lettuce anywhere near my f*cking lobster roll, I’ll just give it back.

LOMAC: If you’re serving a roll on a baguette or brioche – I think at some point throughout my journeys in LA I’ve seen them on a puff pastry – it might look beautiful, but for me, it just doesn’t have that tradition behind it.

OLIVER: Foods on the gimmicky side, they’re not going to last. Like a Cronut? Oh, please. There’s all kinds of garbage like that out there, and it dies its own natural death,
and we should be grateful. The more a dish relates to the larger culture, if it’s descended from a long family line of something, the more it’s going to endure.

KINGSTON: People thought lobster mac and cheese was going to be the next chowder, but while you certainly see it on menus, it’s not classic, because it’s still not as pure. A lobster roll lets you taste the pureness of real lobster without going too crazy.

WHITE: Lobster mashed potatoes? Come on. Macaroni and cheese with lobster? It might be the best way you can eat macaroni and cheese, but it’s got to be one of the worst ways you can eat lobster. To me, it’s all about flavor, texture, aroma. Look at the great classic dishes, like bouillabaisse – it reached perfection 100 years ago. There’s really not much to do with it. In the end, the dishes that last are the ones that have incredible flavor – which is probably why the hamburger has lasted through all kinds of bastardizations and fast-food garbage.

LANDGARTEN: You can’t argue with the downright deliciousness of the lobster roll. Whether or not you get it hot with butter, you still have the hot butter carmelization on the roll, so the butter flavor is there. You get the fresh meat, you get the pop with the outer skin giving way to the inside, a burst of salty yummy flavor. It’s just tremendous.

REICHL: It’s our dish. Atlantic lobsters are an iconic American food, and it makes sense we would democratize this thing that in almost all the rest of the world is a luxury food by putting it on a hot dog bun with a lot of mayonnaise – that we would bring it down to ballpark level. The lobster roll makes more sense to me as an icon of American food than a hamburger. I mean “hamburger” isn’t even an American word. We didn’t invent it. Lobster rolls are really ours.