The story of how lobster became the symbol of Maine

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If you live in Maine, you're probably spending at least part of your summer feeding lobster to house guests, teaching them how to crack open the claws, extract the tail and pick out the hard-to-reach bits of meat with tools that make the entire experience feel like a childhood game of Operation.

You may also start your car with keys hanging from a lobster keychain, set your morning cup of coffee on a lobster trap coffee table, or season your food with a pair of lobster claw salt and pepper shakers. Maybe there are a couple of colorful lobster buoys hanging in your garden.

At last count, 42,668 Mainers were driving around with a lobster license plate, albeit one that pictures a cooked red lobster hanging out on a rock.

The Maine lobster – whether we are eating it, wearing it, or decorating with it – has become so synonymous with our state and who we are that it truly deserves the status of cultural and culinary icon. If Moxie is that awkward cousin we have nothing in common with, but invite to the table anyway, lobster is the favorite uncle we welcome into our homes with open arms. Culturally, lobster is the great equalizer, uniting Mainers of different economic classes and political bents. As a food, it is both rustic and gourmet. It can be eaten outside, on a paper plate at a picnic table, or by candlelight, on the best china in a fine-dining restaurant. Like the big corn palaces of Iowa, or the crawfish T-shirts in The Big Easy that ask you to “Put the South in Your Mouth,” the Maine lobster is “a very visible reminder or symbol of who you are and what group you belong to, whose identity you belong to,” said Beth Forrest, a professor at the Culinary Institute of America and president of the Association for the Study of Food and Society.



George Felt, A.W. Cole and C. Hartford eat large lobsters at the Club Cottage at Higgins Beach, circa 1890. The clock on the wall says 1:45. *Angell Collection, Maine Maritime Museum*

And it's not just Maine that's enamored with this crustacean that looks as if it's been transported from prehistoric times. *Homarus americanus* can be found on the best menus all over the country. Lobster rolls are now available in places like Texas and California, and hordes of tourists visiting Maine proudly tie on those silly plastic lobster bibs in their quest to become one of us, if only for one meal.

Maine lobster is a powerful economic driver, funneling about $1 billion into the state's economy each year according to a 2018 economic study of the industry. But it is also a movie star, forever memorialized in the famous let's-boil-some-shellfish scene in Woody Allen's 1977 film "Annie Hall." It is even a work of art: Surrealist Salvador Dali placed a lobster atop a telephone handset in 1936 to create a sculpture he called "Lobster Telephone."

Today, lobster has become a social media icon as well, in the form of the lobster emoji. (Smarty pants Mainers cried foul when the first version came out with the wrong number of legs.) We even engage in frenzied debates over whether lobsters have consciousness and the capacity to feel pain, or get high when being sedated with pot smoke before they are plunged into boiling water.

How did we get here?

Really jumbo lobsters

Our love of lobster can be traced back generations to the time when Native Americans harvested lobsters at the shore.

The first recorded lobster catch occurred in 1605, when English explorer George Weymouth arrived at Monhegan Island aboard the Archangel. After replenishing their supplies, Weymouth's crew found themselves at the Georges Islands in the midcoast, where James Rosier took notes about what they caught when they went out fishing, including "about thirty very good and great Lobsters."

"They also recorded finding evidence of campfires on land that had fish bones and lobster shells and animal bones and so forth, so there was evidence that it was being consumed and caught well before the settlers came," said Cathy Billings, retired from the University of Maine's Lobster Institute and author of "The Maine Lobster Industry: A History of Culture, Conservation & Commerce."

If you've lived in Maine long enough, it's likely you've heard stories that sound more like fish tales – that a century or two ago, lobsters were huge, and so plentiful they washed ashore in piles two feet high. Prisoners complained about being fed a lot of lobster, and indentured servants once insisted that it be put into their contracts that they didn't have to eat lobster more than three times a week. Is any of this actually true?

Today we consider a two-pound lobster a big lobster. But before the 20th century, lobsters were so big they were the stuff of nightmares. They could weigh as much as six pounds.



Carl A. Garris Jr., a Portland taxidermist, shows off a huge lobster for local newspaper photographers in 1926. For comparison, Garris was five feet, nine inches tall, according to his World War 1 draft card. *Collections of Maine Historical Society/MaineToday Media, courtesy of VintageMaineImages.com*

“There were reports in the 17th century in New York harbor of lobsters that were five or six feet long,” said Nathan Lipfert, longtime curator at the Maine Maritime Museum in Bath (now retired) and co-author of the book “Lobstering and the Maine Coast.”

“Early explorers along the coast did talk about lobsters 4 feet long,” he said, “and I suspect that that is true, not an exaggeration.”

And English settlers in the Plymouth and Cape Cod region of Massachusetts did report that lobsters washed ashore after violent storms, Lipfert said.

In 1622, Billings said, English explorer Thomas Morton recorded observing Native Americans gathering for feasts in groups of 500 to 1,000 “at a place where Lobsters come in with the tyde, to eate, and save dried for store…”

“It doesn’t say anything about washing ashore in two feet piles, but there is that evidence of (them) being in shallow water,” she said. “Some of it is legend and lore that has sort of turned into fact.”

And those pleas from prisoners and indentured servants?

“I’ve been looking for the truth behind that, some documentation for that, for 40 years and I have never found it, so that’s not probably based in fact,” Lipfert said. “However, there was a time when (lobster) didn’t have the luxury food idea behind it that we give it today.”

There is a reference, he said, in William Bradford’s history of the Plymouth colony that early settlers were embarrassed by the thought of having nothing to feed new arrivals but lobster and spring water, instead of what they really wanted – beef and beer.

In pre-Revolution Maine, it was “a sign of poverty to have the shells laying around your house, so people tended to bury them,” said Tilly Laskey, a curator at the Maine Historical Society in Portland.

Even in the 1800s, Billings said, lobster was “only going for a penny-and-a-half a pound. It was not a luxury-priced item, certainly.”

Innovations

But innovations in transportation, along with cultural changes, eventually led to lobster becoming a more desirable – and more expensive – food, Billings said. That led to improvements in equipment and processing that laid the groundwork for the lobster industry we have today.

First came fishing boats called smacks that had a tank that circulated sea water, making it easier to send live lobsters to bigger markets like Boston. These were followed by railroads, which carried lobsters packed in barrels of ice to feed people living a day or two away from the coast, reaching more markets more quickly than smacks could.



Label for canned lobster packed by the Gorham Packing Co. *Collections of Maine Historical Society, courtesy of VintageMaineImages.com*

But there was no real lobster fishery to speak of in Maine until canneries started appearing in the 1840s, Lipfert said. (The canning process was invented in France some 30 years earlier.) “Before that, anybody who lived at the shore could send their kids down to gaffe a few lobsters out from under the rockweed and bring them home,” he said.

Canneries quickly spread the popularity of the shellfish and led to increased demand. Upham S. Treat in Eastport was the first to can lobsters in 1842, and by 1870, there were 23 canneries in Maine.

When Billings gives talks about lobster, she asks her audiences to guess how much the first 1-pound can of lobster cost. They always guess low, but never low enough: It was 3 cents a can.

By the time of the Civil War, Lipfert said, fishermen were already noticing they were having an impact on the lobster fishery, as they were catching fewer and smaller lobsters than they used to. The Maine lobster industry has long been known for its sustainable practices, and

early conservation measures began around that time. That was good for the lobsters, but not so good for the canneries, which had thrived on small lobsters that were not large enough to be served on a dinner plate. When Maine set a size limit in 1895, Lipfert said, the lobsters the canneries had been using suddenly became illegal, and “it shut down all the canneries. Some of them just went out of business, some of them moved across the border to Canada.”



A lobster dinner in Augusta, circa 1900. *Collections of Maine Historical Society, courtesy of VintageMaineImages.com*

With better transportation came cultural changes that helped increase the accessibility and popularity of lobster. Trains brought a big influx of tourism to places like Bar Harbor, where wealthy families were building their summer “cottages” to escape the heat and dust of the big city.

“The story goes that the Rockefellers loved lobster, and they served it to any of their guests who came up for the summer,” Billings said. “It became the en vogue thing to do, to have lobster because the Rockefellers had lobster.”

A growing market for lobster led to the development of better equipment so fishermen could catch more lobster more quickly, which brought down prices. But the lobster industry as we know it didn't really begin until World War II, Lipfert said.

"That was the time when a lot of foodstuffs were rationed, and lobsters were not," he said. "They were considered luxury food, and so they were considered unimportant. During World War II, a lot of families had a larger income than they previously had because the women had gone to work as well. So the demand for lobster grows and the fishermen rose in status and in income."

In the 1950s, airplanes made it possible to ship lobsters as far as the West Coast, and opened up international markets.

The 20th century brought many more innovations, from the ability to freeze lobster meat (Canadian Emile Paturel was the first to do that in 1936) to flash freezing in the 1980s. In the early 21st century came high-pressure processing that separates uncooked lobster from its shell — an innovation chefs loved because it meant they wouldn't overcook the lobster in their finer dishes. These changes, along with increased travel and the spread of easy-to-eat lobster rolls to far-flung corners of the country, have made Maine's favorite crustacean more accessible than ever.

"Times are changing pretty dramatically with respect to foods of a place," said David Page, author of "Food Americana: The Remarkable People and Incredible Stories behind America's Favorite Dishes."

"I grew up in western Massachusetts, and one of the highlights of each year was coming to Maine to eat lobster," he said. "It was very exciting because it was special. It was of a place. We're now at a point where certain foods have become nationally commodified, probably to a great extent because of continuing improvements in processing and transportation of food products."

Marketing Maine

But the mystique of Maine – and good marketing – keeps drawing people here for a first-hand experience eating lobster the old-fashioned way. Nothing, Page notes, can touch the taste of a lobster that's just come out of cold North Atlantic waters.

A lot of the lobster's "iconicness," he said, "really boils down to marketing because I think so far the Maine lobster industry has done a pretty good job of tying the word 'Maine' to lobsters in America, even as more and more of the processed lobster meat that's sold here comes from Canada. If you look at a category of food that hasn't done as well, it's barbecue, where more and more individual regional styles all show up on the same menu – what one author referred to as 'the international house of barbecue.'"

The Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative, founded in 2013 and funded by the lobster industry, spends $1.9 million per year promoting lobster both here and overseas, according to Executive Director Marianne LaCroix.

The collaborative has primarily focused on marketing to restaurants and chefs, since the majority of Maine lobsters is eaten while dining out. But last year, when the pandemic hit, the organization switched gears to focus more on consumers, grocery stores and online sales, LaCroix said, and that strategy has continued this year.

“It’s a pretty similar message though, regardless of whether we’re talking to consumers or chefs,” she said. “One of the primary things that we tell people about is the sustainability of the industry. That’s becoming more and more important to people who buy lobster. And it’s something we’ve got a great story about because the fishermen have been practicing sustainability for over 150 years, which isn’t the case without a lot of fisheries.”



The U.S. Dept. of Commerce used this poster to promote travel to Maine in 1963. *Collections of Maine Historical Society, courtesy of VintageMaineImages.com*

Icon status

Beth Forrest, the CIA professor, says the bond between a place and its food is usually forged by a combination of nature and culture. Lobster is tied to Maine not only because of the physical environment it comes from, and its storied history, but because of the locals who catch it, and who have “an almost folkloric understanding” of how to prepare and eat it. Lobster may bring people of all backgrounds together at a traditional lobster bake, but it also highlights the cultural barriers between the “insiders” and “outsiders.” For Mainers, eating lobster is a kind of ritual, Forrest said, and ritual elevates the status of a food from ordinary to special.

“You can really tell the insiders based on how much meat they get from the lobster – do they really get into the bits and crevices?” she said. “Novice eaters don’t. Some people would be aghast about how much meat they’re throwing out. It becomes almost a source of pride how much lobster you can get out of it.”



Watch Video At: https://youtu.be/xx2gpKOAJW0

Similar strong ties to food and food culture are found elsewhere in the country, of course – crawfish in Louisiana, blue crabs in Maryland, “even barbecue, because barbecue takes such a long time,” Forrest said. “The ritual of barbecue is also in the making.”

Foods can become so much a part of the identity of a state that they almost become mascots, anthropomorphized through cartoonish images on T-shirts or costumes at local festivals. (A lobster, named Crusher, is literally the mascot for the Maine Celtics G League basketball team, formerly called the Red Claws.) The rise of the food festival, Forrest says, “is a ritual in and of itself that reaffirms the status of that ingredient or that foodstuff.”

The Maine Lobster Festival in Rockland, conceived in 1947 and traditionally held now, the first week in August, was canceled for the second consecutive year because of the pandemic, but the Maine Lobster Marketing Collaborative is sponsoring Maine Lobster Week beginning on Sept. 19 and concluding on Sept. 25, National Lobster Day. Lobster will be on menus across the state.

In recent years, lobster-themed restaurants and food trucks have helped spread the gospel of lobster to such landlocked locations as Oklahoma and Ohio – even spots as far away as Singapore and Tokyo – and made it more approachable. People who want to try it don’t have to look at a thing on their plates that resembles a big, nasty insect. Anyone can eat a lobster roll.

Does that mean lobster may one day lose its Maine identity?

Not likely, Forrest says. People will always want to try the original. “You and I can now go to several places in Maine and have barbecue,” she said. “But when we take a trip to the South, are you not going to have barbeque, or are you going to be, like, ‘Oh, now I get to try authentic barbecue?’”

Those silly bibs aren’t going anywhere.

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