

The New York Times



Herb Swanson for The New York Times

Charlotte Bennett of Katonah, N.Y., in New Harbor, Me.

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Published: August 4, 2006

SIGNS scream “Best Lobster Roll in [Maine](#)” at lobster shacks and convenience stores all along the Maine Coast. Stop to ask someone where to find the best, and you will frequently get a definitive answer. It just won’t always be the same one.



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Lobstermen unloading the day’s catch while docked in New Harbor.

“Right there,” said Cassie Mitchell, a clerk at American Sailor Clothing in Kennebunkport, pointing an outstretched arm toward Alisson’s Restaurant, two doors down.

“I only come *here* for lobster rolls,” said Stacy Marotta as she finished lunch 75 miles to the northeast at Red’s Eats in Wiscasset. She and her husband and sons drive 12 hours every summer from their home in [Cleveland](#) to this part of Maine, she said, and Red’s “is our first stop when we get into town and our last stop as we head out.”

The lobster roll — “the lazy man’s lobster,” Mrs. Marotta said — traditionally consists of a toasted hot dog bun topped by pieces of fresh lobster meat and a little bit of something else. The something else is a subject of disagreement.

“Just a little mayo to hold it together, a little salt and pepper and that’s it,” said Rich Winterberg, a bartender at Alisson’s.

“No mayo,” insisted Larry Reed, a lobsterman from New Harbor, on the tip of the next peninsula east from Boothbay Harbor.

“I’m from [Connecticut](#) and down there, a lobster roll is hot and served with butter,” explained a Coast Guardsman aboard a ferry headed to Vinalhaven Island at the mouth of Penobscot Bay. “First time I had a lobster roll up here, I bit into it and said: ‘Whoa. This is cold.’ ”

In a superheated summer, a search for the best lobster rolls is as good an excuse as any to take a road trip on the sea-cooled coast of Maine. On and off Route 1 from Kennebunk north to Rockland, the quiet harbors, sandy beaches and wood-frame shops trimmed with overflowing flower boxes are as inviting as ever. And lobster rolls are ubiquitous.

Anchoring the Kennebunk side of the Kennebunk River bridge, the Clam Shack looks like a food trailer hauled in for a week at the county fair, except it doesn’t have wheels and has been serving up its lobster rolls here for years. This place establishes the central importance of the basic ingredient.

“Picking your own meat in-house makes for the best lobster roll,” the ebullient owner, Steve Kingston, said. His lobster comes from the fish market next door, and an entire lobster’s worth — a pound to a pound and a quarter — is mounded on a toasted round roll made at a French bakery up the road in Biddeford. Drizzled with warm butter, it is pure decadence.

Across the river in Kennebunkport, Alisson’s serves its traditional lobster roll with French fries or cole slaw, and half a dozen other places serve their own versions. Ian Maxwell, 16, did a good job of hawking the one at the Old

Salt's Pantry, where a sign reads: "If you're grouchy, irritable or just plain mean, there is a \$10 surcharge for putting up with you."

"Most people in town do a lobster-salad roll," he said. "Ours is chunks of lobster on top of a grilled hot dog bun with a little mayo or drizzled butter."

After this indulgence, the traveling gourmand needs to burn off some calories. One option is a walk around Kennebunkport, where the bed-and-breakfasts are in old ship captains' houses. Aside from the addition of streetlights, not much seems to have drastically changed in 200 years.

Or rent a bike from Cape-Able Bike Shop and ride four miles out to Goose Rocks Beach, passing [Cape Cod](#) houses, weathered barns draped in American flags and sea kayaks resting on front lawns. Like the seasonal residents who migrate here in the summer, the crescent-shaped, sandy beach looks like a transplant from Florida. Time your ride for midafternoon and you may see lobster boats bringing the next day's meal into Cape Porpoise, a couple of miles to the south.

Back on the lobster hunt, drive up the coast past [Portland](#) and the industrial towns of Bath and Brunswick to Wiscasset. Red's Eats, a "low-slung landmark," as The Boston Globe has described it, "famed among road-food fanatics for its lobster roll," awaits at the bottom of a hill. It has been in business since 1938, and diners have come from [England](#) and [Texas](#), the owner, Alan Gagon, said. On a Thursday in June, two dozen people — men in polo shirts and women clutching canvas totes — waited patiently in line.

Behind the shack, sitting at a white plastic table as 18-wheelers rocketed by, Jeanne Matera of Hingham, Mass., and a friend were assessing the lobster roll. Hunks of lobster meat, with a coral-colored lobster claw as the cherry on top, are piled on a perfectly toasted hot dog roll, with warm butter and mayonnaise served on the side. "We're trying to figure out if it needs a little mayo," Ms. Matera said.

Wiscasset, an old Maine town now fighting over whether to welcome a Wal-Mart, is worth a look around. Next door to Red's Eats is the Wiscasset Old General Store, selling everything from house paint and hardware to quilted bags and herbal lotion. On one side of the noisy Main Street is the Wiscasset Bay Gallery with an interesting collection of work from European and American artists including Paul Strisik, who was inspired by the rugged Maine coast. On the other side is an attractive shop that sells a good selection of wine, local beer and raw-milk cheese.

For a refuge from the Route 1 traffic and a detour back to the ocean, drive south from Wiscasset on Route 27, past rolling lawns and old cemeteries, until you arrive at the storybook town of Boothbay Harbor, at the end of a peninsula jutting into the Atlantic. The winding streets are crammed with clapboard buildings trimmed in white,

many of them shops and galleries. The Novelty, a cruise boat, weaves through moored sailboats and circles the harbor's small islands. From its deck, you can watch lobstermen pulling up their traps. The lobstermen's buoys, painted with their owners' color codes, float like confetti sprinkled on the water.



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Scott Nisbet, left, and David McLain sorting at Shaw's Fish and Lobster Wharf.



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Applying the finishing touch to a Clam Shack lobster roll.

A footbridge connects the east and west sides of the deep U-shaped harbor. On the quieter eastern shore is the Lobster Wharf, formerly the Lobster Cooperative, a working dock and restaurant that also sells clams and lobsters by mail order. Lobster boats motor into the dock with their catches.

Shirtless, wearing an orange fishing bib and wire-rimmed glasses, Philip Peters sorted his bounty from the 80 traps he had hauled up one June morning. "I grew up on this dock, lobstering since I was 10," he said. "My whole family fishes."

But do lobstermen eat lobsters?

“All the time,” he said with a quick smile. Pointing to three of them crawling around, he added, “I’m going to have those right there for lunch.”

Another must-see is New Harbor. To get there, about five miles outside of Boothbay Harbor on Route 27, veer right onto River Road, a winding route lined with 100-foot pine and maple trees, and after reaching Route 1, turn south on Route 130 at Damariscotta, a fishing village with a well-stocked bookstore.

Dining on the two-story deck of Shaw’s Fish and Lobster Wharf in New Harbor, with golden afternoon light glinting off moored lobster boats and wooden schooners, is as picturesque as it gets. Scenes in “Message in a Bottle,” a film with Paul Newman and Kevin Costner, were shot at Shaw’s. The place’s best feature, however, is authenticity. While tourists and locals dine upstairs on lobster in its various forms, lobstermen suck down pints downstairs at the raw bar, still wearing their knee-high rubber boots and Hooters T-shirts sweaty from a day at sea.

Jump back on Route 1 and drive about 45 miles north to Rockland, on Penobscot Bay. You’ll pass a looming cement factory on the way; in Rockland harbor, barges hauling cement share space with cruise sailboats and commuter ferries to offshore islands. In the town’s historic district on Main Street, the Farnsworth Art Museum and Wyeth Center displays works by American artists including N. C., Andrew and Jamie Wyeth.

You’ll find a Triple Decker Lobstah Sandwich with lots of crispy bacon at the Brass Compass on Main Street, and a simple but delicious lobster roll at Catch of the Day, a modest shack run by Kylie and Amanda Hale, who are sisters.

At the waterfront off Park Street, you can catch a Captain Jack’s boat ride. Don’t let the hokey name fool you. Captain Jack Lobster Boat Cruises is as close as you’ll get to lobstering, short of buying a boat and license yourself. Captain Jack is actually the strawberry-blond 7-year-old grandson of Steve Hale, a lobsterman and the father of Kylie and Amanda.

Mr. Hale fished full-time for 35 years before a fall onto a wharf forced him to scale back. Now he and Jack take up to six visitors at a time around the bay where, as he described it, “I’m going fishing and you’re paying me to do it.”

The strapping Mr. Hale, who has a silver Fu Manchu mustache and a lobster tattoo on his left triceps, owns 300 traps and hauls them up on a three-to-four-day rotating schedule. Using a long, flat wood stick with a hook on the end, he grabbed the rope leading to the trap one day in mid-June and hoisted it on board. A hefty lobster was inside. “That’s a keeper,” said the industrious Jack. “How much I make on that one?”

An hour of work yielded about a dozen lobsters for Mr. Hale and his grandson, and plenty of amusement for their guests. Lounging on the boat in the late-morning sun, with lobster boats bobbing in the inky water and seagulls squawking overhead, was the perfect close to a culinary journey along the Maine coast. “It doesn’t get much better than this,” Mr. Hale said, speaking the thought.

Well. Except with a lobster roll and a beer.

Details

THE going price of a lobster roll is from \$12.95 to \$16.95. These are places to try them:

Alisson’s Restaurant in Kennebunkport (11 Dock Square; 207-967-4841).

The Clam Shack in Kennebunk (2 Western Avenue; 207-967-2560).

Red’s Eats in Wiscasset (41 Water Street, at Main Street; 207-882-6128).

The Lobster Wharf in Boothbay Harbor (97 Atlantic Avenue; 207-633-4900).

Shaw’s Fish and Lobster Wharf in New Harbor (129 Route 32; 207-677-2200).

The Brass Compass (305 Main Street; 207-596-5960) and Catch of the Day (745 Main Street; 207-594-7770), both in Rockland.

The [Maine Lobster Festival](http://www.maine lobster festival.com) (www.maine lobster festival.com) in Rockland is running this week, continuing through Sunday.

The 64 rooms at the Tugboat Inn in Boothbay Harbor (80 Commercial Street; 800-248-2628; www.tugboatinn.com), most with harbor views, go for \$140 to \$225 in summer.

The LimeRock Inn in Rockland (96 Limerock Street; 800-546-3762; www.limerockinn.com) has eight rooms, with high ceilings and antiques, beginning at \$130 in summer.

Cape-Able Bike Shop (83 Arundel Road, Kennebunkport, or at the Outpost in the Lower Village, Kennebunk; 207-967-4382, www.capeablebikes.com) rents several kinds of bicycles. A hybrid bike is \$17 for three hours and \$22 for a day.

One-hour tours of Boothbay Harbor on the Novelty (Boothbay Harbor; 800-298-2284; www.balmydayscruises.com) are \$12; \$6 for children.

Captain Jack Lobster Boat Cruises in Rockland (middle pier, Harbor Park; 207-594-1048; www.captainjacklobstertours.com) are \$25; \$15 for children.