



On summer weekends, when the midday sun glitters off the harbor in St. Michaels, Maryland, the Crab Claw is as rowdy as a church on bingo night. Every pine-green picnic table is filled with groups of noisy sailors, off-duty deckhands, and pink-faced landlubbers in Ravens caps and Tommy Bahama shirts. Everybody knows everybody else, and they all know the chorus to “Brandy (You’re a Fine Girl).”

The Crab Claw has been on this dock since 1965. It is one of untold hundreds of waterside restaurants that fringe the Eastern Shore of Chesapeake Bay—but at the moment, it’s hard to imagine a better one. Our waitress, Donna, is sharp as malt vinegar, salty as the air. She looks like how I imagine Brandy-the-fine-girl looks: ponytail; crow’s-feet; pretty and worldly-wise. While the men tell their sailor stories and their wives hoot with laughter, Donna just rolls her eyes and smiles. They’re already on their second or third Bloody Mary, and it’s barely past noon.

Then the crabs appear—plump beauties beneath fiery-orange dunes of Baltimore Spice—and a hush falls over each table. Bibs are tied, napkins secured. Suddenly it’s as if everyone’s hunched over a Rubik’s Cube, except they’re devouring little pieces as they go. Even the children wield their mallets with authority. From our table my wife and I watch with a mixture of hunger and envy.

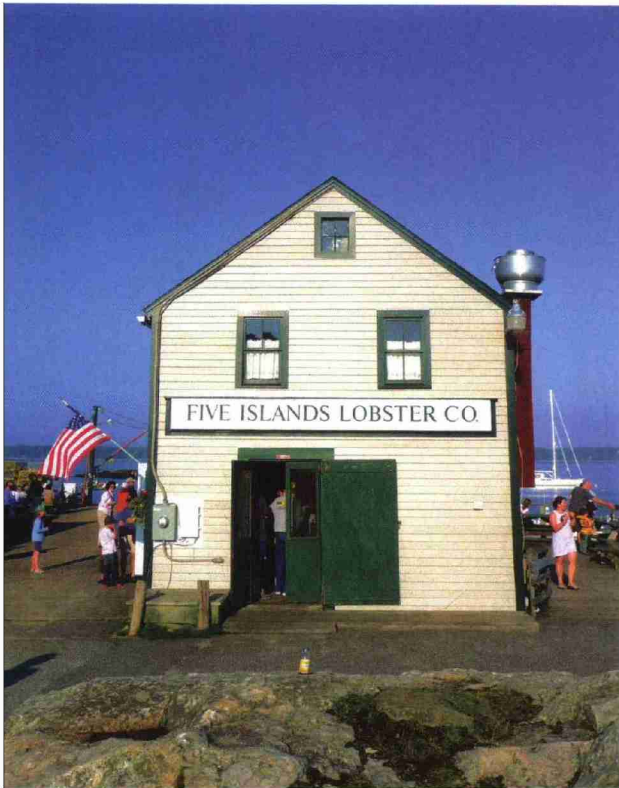
We are not from around here.

We are, shall we say, fish out of water. Having grown up in New England, I know my way around a lobster. But the inside of a blue crab might as well be a laptop motherboard. Right now I can’t even get the cover off.

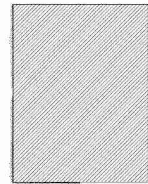
Thankfully, Donna is here to help. She pries open the apron flap—a hinge on the crab’s belly that, per Donna, “proves God meant for us to eat ‘em.” In short order she pulls back the outer shell, plucks off the legs, and cracks open the carapace to reveal snow-white hunks of glistening, succulent meat. She never once picks up the mallet.

By the 12th crab we have the hang of it. Our fingers, cheeks, and jeans are stained orange, and our sun-chapped lips are stinging from paprika. Like intent archaeologists we sift through mounds of shells and spice-dust, searching for whatever nuggets may still be hiding.

We linger long into the afternoon, listening to yacht-rock and watching skiffs and sailboats and ducks and jellyfish float by, until the dock is near-empty. Around us is a scene of medieval carnage: six dozen tables piled with empty cups, squeezed lemon wedges, and towering middens of crab shells. (Does any cuisine have as high a body count?) In a few hours the tables will be cleared, the decks swabbed, and another hundred bushels of crab hauled in. Then the whole joyous ritual will start up again for dinner.

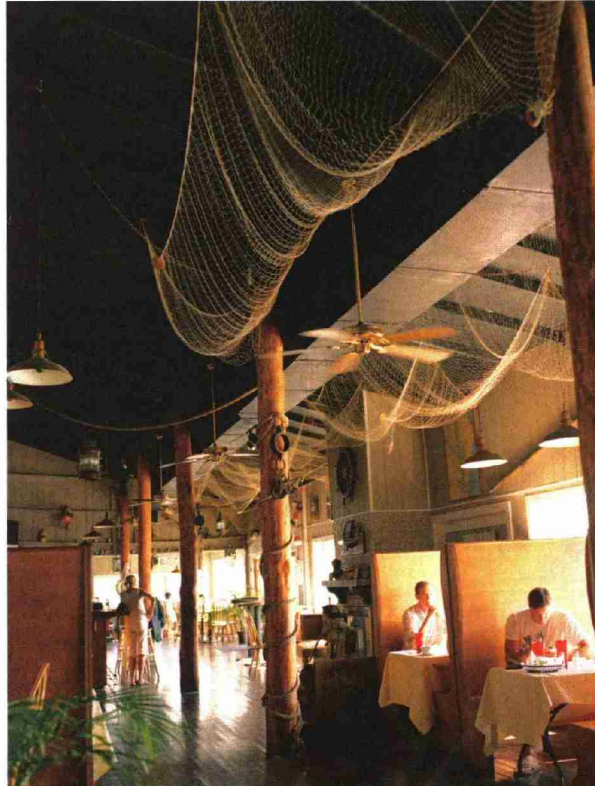
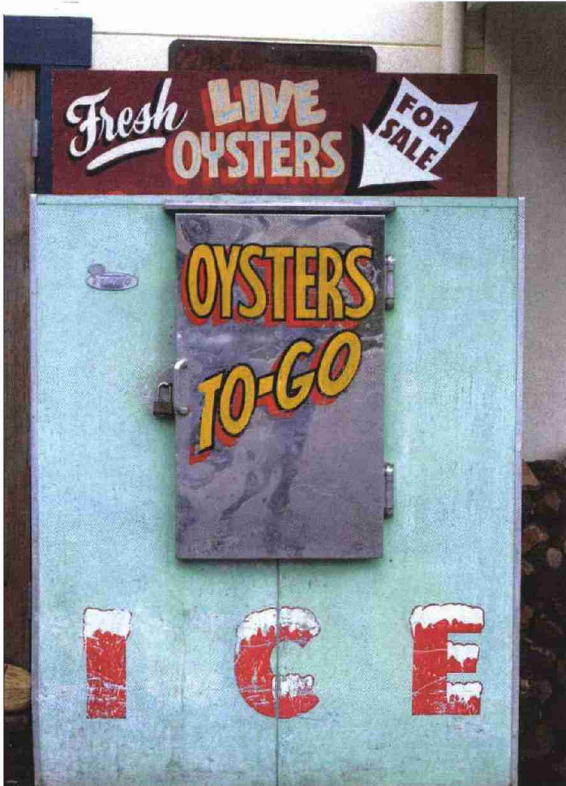


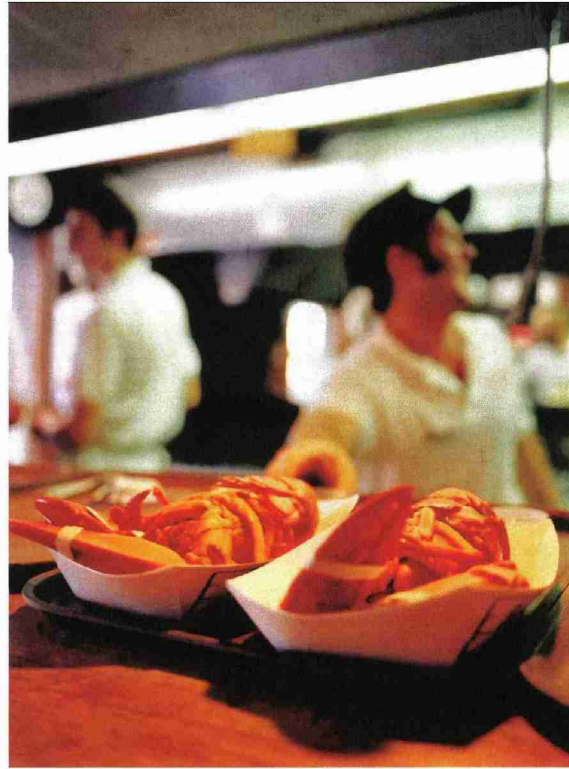
FROM TOP: CEDRIC ANGELES; OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: WHITNEY LAWSON (2), MOSES BERKSON



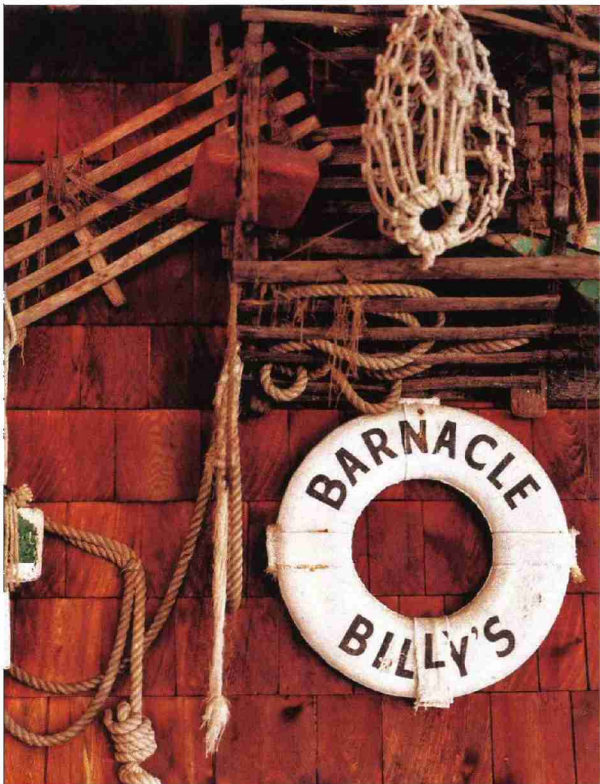


SHELL GAME Clockwise from above: A table setting at the Crab Claw, in St. Michaels, Maryland; Schooners on the Creek, in Oxford, Maryland; outside Nick's Cove. Opposite, from top: Gulf shrimp from the Shrimp Shack, in Seaside, Florida; Georgetown, Maine's Five Islands Lobster Co.





SURF-TO-TABLE DINING Clockwise from above left: The Shrimp Shack's dining pavilion; fresh lobster from Barnacle Billy's Restaurant, in Ogunquit, Maine; the Shrimp Shack's Apalachicola oysters three ways; nautical gear at Barnacle Billy's.



What's so special about eating by the water? Oftentimes, not much. The majority of waterfront restaurants are frankly terrible, cashing in on the scenery with overcooked food, half-baked décor, underhanded prices, and watered-down margaritas. Worse, many of those touting "local seafood" source their catch from overseas.

All of which means the great ones are a rare and welcome exception. I'm talking about places that make the most of not only their setting—on a beach, a bay, an estuary, a lake—but also of the local bounty, be it with briny oysters or littleneck clams, boiled crawfish or fried soft-shell crabs, spicy fish tacos or buttery lobster rolls.

For the past few summers I've been circling the nation's coastline, exploring the many subzones of our endlessly regionalized waterside dining culture, from Puget Sound to Long Island Sound, the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes. On the whole I've had more mediocre food than good. But there were plenty of places that got it right, achieving with a premise so simple and obvious—selling seafood by the seashore—a kind of magic.

Something happens to people, and to the way they eat, near bodies of water. The beer gets hoppier, the polos brighter, the puns cornier. (In Chesapeake Bay I spotted five DON'T BOTHER ME, I'M FEELING CRABBY T-shirts in as many days.) Women let their hair down; men grow goatees and start dressing like Jimmy Buffett. Maybe they'll wear a pirate-motif bandanna. Maybe they'll tie one on their dog. To a nonbeliever this all might come off as kitsch, but there's nothing ironic about it. Seafood shacks are the furthest thing from hipster-cool, and that's precisely what makes them so appealing. The lobster traps may be decorative, but the sincerity is genuine.

The humblest spots are usually the best. Places like the Shrimp Shack, in Seaside, Florida, which serves peel-and-eat Gulf shrimp, sweet as candy, on a breezy pavilion by the beach. (Royal Red shrimp, talcum-white sand, cobalt-blue water: how American can you get?) Or Iggy's Doughboys & Chowder House, on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay, where the clam cake is as tasty as people say, and the quahogs come from just up the shore. Or Malibu, California's 34-year-old Malibu Seafood, a slacker-surfer joint on the Pacific Coast Highway, whose moist and flaky fish sandwich is a bargain at \$5.95.

Some waterfront shacks may appear humble, but spent a boatload of money to look the part. North of San Francisco, on Tomales Bay (source of California's finest oysters), restaurateur Pat Kuleto invested over \$13 million in renovating Nick's Cove, a rustic, 1930's-era fishing lodge, until it resembled...a rustic, 1930's-era fishing lodge. Decked out with maritime detritus—buoys; crab pots; mounted marlin—the restaurant still seems held together with sailor's rope and fishing wire. And given the stirring views (that's Hog Island right out the window), the food is way better

than it has to be: pristine Californian halibut, smoky Manila clam chowder, and, of course, expertly shucked oysters, served chilled with a jalapeño-and-cilantro mignonette or barbecued in a tangy chipotle sauce (surprisingly addictive). Kuleto is in the process of selling to new owners, who one hopes will retain the folksy roadhouse vibe. In the meantime Nick's draws a regular crowd of workaday guys in overalls and hippie Marin gals; they stay late into the night at the worn mahogany bar, bonding over pints of Lagunitas IPA and platters of Hog Islands.

But here's the catch: while waterfront

restaurants make a point of being all democratic and convivial, they can be dauntingly inscrutable, even forbidding, to an outsider. First of all, the best ones are often hard to find, at least if you're not arriving by boat. Sometimes it seems they don't want to be found. I once got lost for hours on the craggy reaches of Maine's Midcoast, near Georgetown, looking for a place called Lisa's Lobster House, which finally materialized at the end of a rural road straight out of *Deliverance*, complete with washing machines rusting in front yards. The quest was worth it for Lisa's lobster roll, and the unexpectedly majestic view of Sheepscot Bay. (Sadly, Lisa's has since closed. Perhaps it was too difficult to find.)

Second, once you do arrive, eating may pose a challenge in itself. Any rube can figure out how to dress a hot dog or fold a slice of pizza. But extracting a meal's worth of nourishment from a Dungeness crab? *That's* something. No wonder they print instructions on the place mats. This is food that makes you work, demanding Zen-like patience and a whole learned tradition of skills. A grown man can derive an inordinate sense of achievement from dismantling a six-ounce crustacean with his bare hands. As for the grown man who can't do the job? Trust me, it's humiliating.

Then there's the baffling argot of regional nicknames, recalling 1950's greaser slang: "busters," "pistols," "punks," "chix," "softs." (Respective translations: a molting crab; a clawless lobster; a roe-bearing female crab; a one-pound lobster; a soft-shell crab, lobster, or clam.)

Finally, there are your fellow customers, who know the ropes far better than you, because they've probably been coming here forever. Like adult oysters, which tend to affix themselves to a single rock or riverbed and feed there for life, humans can be stubbornly parochial about their watery haunts. In Essex, Massachusetts, I met a guy who'd been coming to J.T. Farnham's marsh-side shack for 53 summers, ever since his grandfather took him when he was a boy. "Best fried clams in New England," he assured me. I asked if he'd ever tried the near-identical-looking clam shack down the road, which had been there since 1914. He gave me a look that said, *Why would I? Why indeed.* »

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: CEDRIC ANGELES; KELLER & KELLER; CEDRIC ANGELES; KELLER & KELLER

Seafood Shacks

My wife and I wound up

spending six days on Maryland's Eastern Shore, tracing a road map as convoluted as a crab's shell, searching every crooked peninsula and dead-end coastal lane for our next favorite seafood shack. As with the crabmeat, the most rewarding bits were the trickiest to reach. There was Ruke's Store & Seafood Deck, sequestered on carless Smith Island; and Schooners on the Creek, in Oxford, accessed via the Oxford-Bellevue Ferry, in operation since 1683; and our top choice among the bunch, Waterman's Crab House, in Rock Hall, 10 nautical miles north of the Bay Bridge but 1½ hours by car in weekend traffic. Here we passed a blissful afternoon under a crystalline sky, clear but for the fragrant clouds rising from the steam pots that were cooking our lunch. By now we'd fully honed our technique, and a

dozen crabs were briskly dispatched.

What we learned, overall, was that (a) Maryland has a *lot* of standout crab shacks, and (b) there is no such thing as a typical Maryland crab shack. Little differences abounded. Case in point: every place covered the tables with butcher paper, but each had its own peculiar method of doing so. One held the paper down with packing tape, another with vise grips; another used a fearsome-looking staple gun. One simply placed condiment holders and napkin dispensers at strategic corners. (Not so effective against an offshore breeze.) Schooners had the most dramatic technique: a busboy hoisted the umbrella out from the hole in the picnic table, hastily unfurled a sheet of paper, then stabbed the umbrella stake back through the center.

It struck us that waterfront restaurants are like tinier Liechtensteins, self-contained microcultures that boil down

to a set of seemingly trivial allegiances—Old Bay or Baltimore Spice? Malt or cider vinegar? Captain Morgan's or Bacardi? Staples or tape? What passes for gospel in one cove might be heresy in the next. But of course it's their quirky insularity, coupled with their inextricability from their environments, that gives waterside restaurants such a profound sense of place. Few eating spots are so defiantly, definitively local. Although common tropes run through the genre—fryolators; finger bowls; a shirking of pretense—the best seafood shacks bear the inimitable imprint of their setting, telling the visitor in no uncertain terms: YOU ARE HERE. They are among the last bastions of regional culture in a nation that's fast losing them. For a traveler, unlocking the rituals of such a place is to feel, thrillingly, like a native. And solving the riddle of a hard-shell crab? Well, that merits another Bloody Mary. ♣

AMERICA'S BEST WATERFRONT SEAFOOD SHACKS

ALASKA

Hangar on the Wharf Watch floatplanes take off over Gastineau Channel while feasting on king crab and fish tacos. 2 Marine Way, Juneau; 907/586-5018; lunch for two \$25.

WASHINGTON

Lowell's Restaurant & Bar The perfect Seattle breakfast? Eggs scrambled with Dungeness crab, served at a window table overlooking Elliott Bay. 1519 Pike Place, Seattle; 206/622-2036; breakfast for two \$30.

Tides Tavern Clam chowder, fish-and-chips, alderwood-smoked salmon—plus a devoted local crowd and a pretty marina on Puget Sound. 2925 Harborview Dr., Gig Harbor; 253/858-3982; lunch for two \$30.

CALIFORNIA

Malibu Seafood 25653 Pacific Coast Hwy., Malibu; 310/456-3430; lunch for two \$25.

Marshall Store Oyster bar and smokehouse on Tomales Bay (five minutes from Nick's Cove), with fabulous barbecued oysters. 19225 Hwy. 1, Marshall; 415/663-1339; lunch for two \$30.

Nick's Cove & Cottages 23240 Hwy. 1, Marshall; 415/663-1033;

dinner for two \$32.

South Beach Bar & Grille

Rowdy surfers' hangout in San Diego with great grilled mahimahi tacos. 5059 Newport Ave., Ocean Beach; 619/226-4577; lunch for two \$15.

MINNESOTA

Fisher's Club Co-owned by Garrison Keillor, this cozy, 79-year-old lakefront retreat is renowned for walleye. 428 Stratford St. W., Avon; 320/356-7372; dinner for two \$35.

FLORIDA

Cabbage Key Quirky, palm-fringed island hideaway populated by pelicans, turtles, and Parrotheads (i.e. Buffett fans), who gather for stone crab in the 1930's-era tavern by the marina. Marker 60, Intracoastal Waterway; 239/283-2278; lunch for two \$25.

Shrimp Shack 2236 Co. Hwy. 30A, Seaside; 850/231-3799; lunch for two \$30.

GEORGIA

Bonna Bella Waterfront Grille Docksides gem just beyond downtown Savannah known for shrimp and grits as well as roasted bivalves. 2740 Livingston Ave., Savannah; 912/352-3133;

dinner for two \$30.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Bowens Island Restaurant

A 1946 Lowcountry classic—rustic as all get-out—with killer roasted oysters. 1871 Bowens Island Rd., Charleston; 843/795-2757; dinner for two \$28.

11th Street Docksides Restaurant

While gazing out from the glass-walled porch over Battery Creek's shrimp boats, order up a catch for yourself. 1699 11th St. W., Port Royal; 843/524-7433; dinner for two \$45.

MARYLAND

Crab Claw 304 Burns St., St. Michaels; 410/745-2900; lunch for two \$30.

Ruke's Store & Seafood Deck Smith Island; 410/425-2311; lunch for two \$20.

Schooners on the Creek 314 Tilghman St., Oxford; 410/226-0160; lunch for two \$20.

Waterman's Crab House 21055 Sharp St., Rock Hall; 410/639-2261; lunch for two \$20.

RHODE ISLAND

Iggy's Doughboys & Chowder House 889 Oakland Beach Ave., Warwick; 401/737-9459; lunch for two \$20.

MASSACHUSETTS

J.T. Farnham's A 70-year-old landmark on the North Shore's "Clam Alley," serving excellent deep-fried bellies beside a tranquil salt marsh. 88 Eastern Ave., Essex; 978/768-6643; lunch for two \$20.

MAINE

Barnacle Billy's Restaurant Knockout lobster rolls and harbor views from a breezy, sun-drenched wraparound deck. 50 Perkins Cove Rd., Ogunquit; 207/646-4711; lunch for two \$38.

Chauncey Creek Lobster Pier BYOB and join local families at this old-timey favorite, hidden away on a lovely tidal river a short ride from Portsmouth, New Hampshire. 16 Chauncey Creek Rd., Kittery Point; 207/439-1030; lunch for two \$30.

Five Islands Lobster Co. Water, water, everywhere, and plenty of Allagash ale to drink—plus stellar lobster, clams, and onion rings. 1447 Five Islands Rd., Georgetown; 207/371-2990; lunch for two \$40.



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