



A Passion for Lobster

How a Maine chef captures
all the flavor from these
expensive crustaceans

BY SAM HAYWARD

When Europeans first settled in coastal New England, lobsters were so plentiful that farmers plowed them into fields as fertilizer. There are accounts of lobsters crawling onto dry land to escape an overcrowded ocean floor. Indentured servants, contracting passage to America, set a limit to how many lobsters could be included in their diets. Things sure have changed. Once abundant, Maine lobsters are now a luxury.

Even here on the coast, the price of lobster is high, so I take advantage of every flavor-bearing part of them. On top of the rich tail and claw meat, I use the liquids released during shelling, the vegetable-, wine-, and lobster-flavored court bouillon in which the lobster was poached, and even the shells. I'm also fond of the soft, olive-green tomalley found in the body cavity, and the bright-red roe in the tail and body of many female lobsters. I use all of these to strengthen the delicate lobster flavor in dishes such as Lobster Cakes with Basil and Lobster Coulis or, my family's favorite, Lobster Chowder (recipes on pp. 52–53).

The Maine lobster, as *Homarus americanus* is popularly called, is fished commercially from Long Island Sound to Newfoundland. The only lobster similar to it is the Brittany lobster, found on the European shores of the Atlantic and North Sea. Other so-called lobsters exist all around the globe, though these are clawless and inferior impostors, as any Mainer can tell you. The langouste of France, the spiny or rock lobster of the tropical Atlantic, and the

Nothing beats a Maine lobster. Lobster's sweet, tender, and delicately flavored meat is irresistible simply cooked and dipped in butter, as a topping for pasta, or made into chowder or lobster cakes.

Photos: Suzanne Roman

slipper of Southeast Asia have more of a shrimplike flavor, and the only edible part of them is their tail.

Maine lobsters have a sweeter, more delicate flavor and a more tender texture than these clawless lobsters, and they yield additional meat from the claws, knuckles, and legs. As a bonus to cooks, Maine lobsters are available live and whole, which means that more flavor and food is available in the juices and shells that come with them.

HOW TO CHOOSE THEM

When buying Maine lobsters, make sure that they're alive. A healthy "bug" will arch its back and raise its claws menacingly, while both a sleepy lobster and a dead lobster will have drooping claws and tail. I always check to see if the mouth parts are moving because the gills located there will be faintly waving for oxygen if the lobster has any life left in him. While a recently expired lobster may still be fine to eat, a long-dead lobster can contain toxic amounts of dangerous bacteria. The dead lobster's own digestive enzymes will decompose the flesh, making the meat mushy and tasteless and tainting the wonderful juices from the body cavity.

Lobsters won't live long out of the water, so it's best to buy and cook them the same day. Keep lobsters in the refrigerator in a paper bag until you're ready to put them in the pot.

Size—Years ago a premium was placed on really big lobsters of ten pounds or more. These are now rare, and it's illegal to take them in Maine waters. For all their showiness, the meat on these monsters is generally tough and lacks the delicate sweetness I prefer. I've found that the smaller the lobster, the denser and smoother the fibers in its meat. The smallest lobsters legally taken in Maine, called chickens, weigh between sixteen and twenty ounces. A good hard-shell lobster of this weight with two claws will yield about five ounces of meat to an experienced picker. In my opinion, three one-pound lobsters will taste better—

and represent a better value—than one three-pounder that will cost the diner a small fortune.

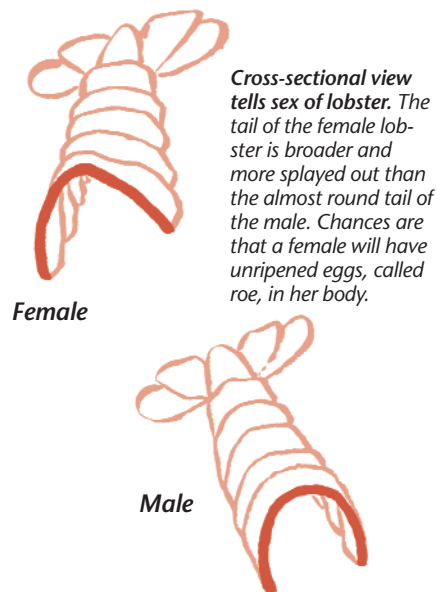
Females—Cooks prize female lobsters for their unripened eggs, called roe or coral (see the sidebar on p. 51). Delicately flavored, these blackish-green eggs turn bright red when cooked. There are two ways to distinguish a female from a male. First, the female's tail is broad and flat; the edges are slightly splayed out. The edges of the male's tail curve around as if they want to connect in a complete circle (see the illustration below). Second, the tiny first pair of swimmerets on the underside of the tail on the female are delicate and thin, while the swimmerets on males are thick.

Shedders—Lobsters must shed their external skeletons in order to grow. The molt occurs during the summer months, triggered by changes in water temperature. New-shell lobsters, or shedders, have soft, papery shells that peel easily. Since vulnerable shedders tend to hide rather than graze, they have less meat than hard-shell lobsters of the same size. But the meat of shedders is exceptionally sweet and tender, and I prefer their flavor, though that's hardly a universal opinion here in Maine.

Where they're from—Most lobsters caught in the Gulf of Maine come from traps set within ten miles of

the coast. It seems strange to think of lobsters as farmed, but that's very nearly the case. It takes roughly seven years for a lobster to grow to legal size, which is also the age that females start to reproduce. Lobstermen are actually feeding the general lobster population because they haul the traps (baited with salted fish) every day or so and throw back the immature lobsters.

Lobsters taken offshore from deeper, cleaner, and colder waters have all the sweetness of any healthy lobster, but they also have a gentle smack of iodine. The tomalley from these bugs is salty and fishy in a thoroughly delightful way, and it flavors soups and sauces with clean lobster essence. I've tasted excep-



Remove the bands to keep the flavor pure. The rubber bands that lobstermen put on the lobsters' claws can taint the cooking liquid and should be removed before cooking. Hayward holds the lobster securely by its body, slips a knife underneath the band and, pushing the band away from himself, snaps it off.



This lobster isn't done. Tug on a feeler to test for doneness. When the lobster is fully cooked, the feeler comes off easily. If the tougher connective tissue holding the feeler is cooked enough to separate, the meat inside is cooked, too.

tional lobsters from around the Isles of Shoals in southern Maine, and from Monhegan Island and other offshore locales near the broad mouth of Penobscot Bay. All different, all wonderful.

Unfortunately, the tomalley in some lobsters caught off the Maine Coast has been found to contain dioxin and other carcinogenic chemical residue. The Maine Department of Environmental Protection and two other state agencies recommend that lobster eaters limit their consumption of tomalley, and that women in their child-bearing years refrain altogether. No dioxins or other harmful compounds have been found in the lobster meat itself.

COOKING LOBSTERS

There are many ways to cook lobster. For centuries along the Maine shore, lobsters have been piled in hot, stone-lined pits with sweet corn, potatoes, and clams and steamed in the oceanic vapor contributed by seaweed. On restaurant menus you'll see them boiled, baked-stuffed, poached, broiled, and grilled. I've even heard of microwaving them inside an oiled paper bag. While all these methods work, the three I prefer are steaming, poaching, and grilling.

Simply steamed—Steaming lobsters is the simplest method and better than boiling because you don't have to wait for gallons of water to come to a boil, and little of the lobster's flavor leaches out. You'll need a pot large enough to easily contain all the lobsters you plan to cook, and it should have a

tight-fitting lid. Add just one inch of water to the pot and bring it to a rapid boil. If you're near the ocean, try using sea water or adding some fresh seaweed to the pot.

Before adding the lobsters, rinse them briefly under cool running water and remove the elastic bands from their claws (see photo at left). The rubber can impart a slight aroma to the cooked lobsters. Put the lobsters in the pot on their backs. This quickens cooking a little, and the lobsters expire faster. Quickly cover the pot and turn up the heat to bring the water back to a boil.

Cook 1- to 1½-pound lobsters for seven minutes over high heat, timing from the moment the water returns to a boil. After seven minutes, turn off the heat and let the lobsters rest in the covered pot for a minute. If the lobsters are stacked more than three or four layers deep in the pot, cook the lobsters in the steam for ten to twelve minutes. Remove the lobsters from the pot with tongs and serve immediately. Larger lobsters will also require more time over boiling water. Two-pound lobsters need about ten minutes to cook through. To check if a lobster is done, take hold of one of the long feeler antennae, and give a slight pull. If it separates easily, the lobster is sufficiently cooked (see photo at far left).

Poaching in flavor—I like to poach lobsters because the gentle cooking produces meat that's both denser and tenderer than steamed meat. When poached in a court bouillon—a liquid flavored with herbs, vegetables, wine, and other savory ingredients—the lobsters absorb some of the flavor and aroma from the liquid. (Recipe on p. 52.)

Rinse the lobsters briefly under cool running water, remove the elastic bands, and put the lobsters in the boiling bouillon. If necessary, add water to completely cover the lobsters. Keep the flame high until the bouillon returns to a simmer, and then reduce the heat. A bare simmer is sufficient: at the perfect temperature, the bouillon will just tremble, not bubble. Poach the lobsters for twelve minutes, regulating the heat carefully. Turn off the burner, and allow the lobsters to repose in the bouillon for an additional two minutes. Remove the lobsters and cool them slightly before shelling.

To strengthen the bouillon, put the lobster shells back into the bouillon, return to a simmer, and cook fifteen minutes. Strain and reserve.

Grilling—I love the gentle smokiness that grilling gives to lobsters. Before grilling, partially poach or steam them for about five minutes, and then cool and shell them. Cut the meat into large pieces and marinate it briefly. I suggest a brightly flavored herb butter, or a freshly made pesto lightened with additional extra-virgin olive oil, or a marinade of rice-wine vinegar, slivered garlic, peanut oil, soy, and cilantro leaves. Lightly rub the outside of the shells

with a little vegetable oil to keep them from becoming brittle or scorched, and pile the meat back inside. Rake the fire in the grill to one side, place the upturned, filled lobster bodies on the far side of the grill, and put the cover on the grill. The lobsters are done as soon as the heat has penetrated to the center of the meat. Test by inserting a thin knife into the meat and touching the side of the blade to your lip or tongue. It should feel hot.

SHELLING LOBSTERS

For purists, the only way to enjoy a lobster is to pick the meat from its shell after steaming or boiling and to dip it, morsel by morsel, into warm clarified butter. Not being a purist, I like to pick the entire lobster (or better, two) and put the meat directly into a bowl with a little butter, the tomalley, and the coral. The flavors intensify each other, and nothing is lost or wasted.

With a little experience, shelling lobsters becomes quick and efficient. If you're shelling lobster at the table, arm yourself with a lobster cracker and a cocktail fork. If you're shelling lobster in the kitchen, set a strainer over a bowl to collect all the liquid and the tomalley and roe that flow from the shells.

Major breaks—First break the lobster into manageable pieces. Twist the tail off the body and break off the tail fins by bending them backward. Break off the claws at the body, and pull the body shell off the white body frame (see photo on p. 52).

Tomalley—Look into the body shell for the tomalley. Actually the hepatopancreas, an organ that combines some functions of both liver and pancreas, the tomalley bursts and liquefies when cooked. Tourists can be seen in any lobster house on the coast of Maine squeamishly confronting tomalley for the first time. But those who really appreciate lobsters know that this olive-green pâté is one of the most delectable parts of a lobster. Since I found out that the tomalley may contain minute amounts of dioxin, I stopped including the tomalley in dishes that I serve to the public, but I can't resist eating it myself every once in a while.

Tail—When it's cool enough to handle, place the



Delicate roe

Female lobsters often have unripened eggs, called roe or coral, in their body cavities and tapering down into their tails. When raw (see top photo at left), the roe is a dark greenish-black color. When cooked, the eggs turn bright red (see bottom photo at left).

You can take advantage of the delicate lobster flavor of the roe in a variety of ways. Whisk raw roe with cream and add it to a soup or sauce. Whirl it with four times its volume of unsalted butter in a food processor to make a green lobster roe butter, which, when whisked into a simmering mixture of wine and bouillon, changes instantly into an orange-pink roe butter sauce. I have painted dinner plates with green roe butter, and slid one side of the plate under a broiler, turning that side of the plate pink and leaving the cooler side pale green.

Bright-red cooked roe has a grainy, waxy texture that looks and tastes lovely sprinkled delicately over chowders, soups, and warm or chilled lobster dishes. To separate the eggs, first crumble the cooked, cooled roe with a fork onto a baking sheet, and dry it in a moderate oven. Then rub the roe through a wire strainer to produce tiny red grains.—S.H.

curve of the tail in the curled palm of your hand, nestling the back of the shell between the heel of your hand and your fingers. Squeeze as if to make a fist. The membrane on the bottom of the shell will split. Now grasp the tail in both hands, and spread the tail shell outward and away from you, exposing the tail meat. Remove it in one piece.

Remove the intestinal tract by peeling back the thin, red strip of meat along the back of the tail, exposing the blackish intestine. Pull the intestine out intact, or rinse it out with a little water or bouillon. (I seldom bother to remove the digestive tract for myself, but generally do for other diners.)

Female lobsters may have roe inside the tail meat. The roe will be bright red if the lobster is cooked, and greenish-black if it is mostly raw. (For suggestions on what to do with the roe, see the sidebar above.)

Legs—Twist the eight small legs off the white body frame. If you're eating the lobster, suck the meat out of these as if pulling on a drinking straw, and by progressively squeezing the leg meat out with your front teeth. Somewhere along the line I learned another neat trick for getting the meat out of the small legs. After twisting the legs off the body



The shells have flavor, too. Expose all flavor-bearing parts of the lobster by pulling the white body frame from the red outer shell (above). The shells simmer with tomatoes, aromatic vegetables, and brandy to infuse lobster flavor into the Lobster Coulis (left). See the recipe for this delicious, versatile sauce at right.



frame, put them on a cutting board or the counter. Beginning at the pincer end of each leg, roll a sturdy wine bottle or a rolling pin over the leg, and the meat will squeeze out like toothpaste. I often float these beautiful strands of red lobster meat on the surface of lobster soups.

Claws—Twist the knuckles off the claws. Use a lobster cracker to crack across the claw at the point where the “thumb” is connected. Twist off the thumb by bending it straight backward. The thumb should leave its thin strand of meat behind, and will probably bring with it an oval of inedible cartilage. Now remove the claw meat in one piece. This is awesomely delicious meat. Pick up the knuckles and either push

the meat through the cylindrical shells with your little finger or crack them open with a lobster cracker.

Body—Next spread open the white body frame, and notice the small cartilage chambers along the inside of each half. Each of these chambers harbors a tiny morsel of pure white meat, worth the trouble of extraction to real aficionados. Use a toothpick or cocktail fork for the task.

Liquids and shells—At this point, though you’ve removed all the meat, the roe, and the tomalley, the lobster still has more flavor to give. If you poached the lobster, the court bouillon is gently flavored with lobster and can be used in sauces or soups. The shells can be simmered with court bouillon to give it a more concentrated flavor, and they can also be used to make a great lobster coulis—a thin tomato purée (see the recipe at right). The liquids released from the body cavity during shelling can be used to strengthen the lobster flavor of almost any dish.

A final use for shells—Remember the story about lobster being plentiful enough to plow into fields as fertilizer? Now that we have come full circle, getting full use from just about everything the lobster can yield, the lobster achieves its final destiny in the compost pile. If you don’t have a problem with raccoons or neighborhood dogs, this is a great way to activate a sleepy compost pile. The temperature of mine soars almost instantly when it gets a dose of lobster shells.

LOBSTER COURT BOUILLON

Enough to poach four lobsters at a time.

*4 cloves garlic, chopped coarse
1 cup sliced celery ribs
1 cup sliced carrot
1 medium leek (white and green parts), split, washed, and chopped coarse
1 cup sliced white or yellow onion
1 large sprig of parsley
6 bay leaves
10 to 12 branches thyme
1 branch rosemary
24 peppercorns, lightly cracked
2 Tbs. white-wine vinegar
4 cups dry white wine
8 cups of water*

Put all the ingredients in a large pot, bring to a boil, and simmer for 5 min. For tips on poaching lobsters, see p. 50.

LOBSTER CAKES WITH BASIL AND LOBSTER COULIS

These delicate lobster cakes look and taste wonderful served with fresh basil on a pool of lobster coulis. If you don’t have time to make the coulis, serve the lobster cakes with mustard and fresh tarragon, or with a soft, homemade mayonnaise mixed with capers and parsley or chives. *Serves four as a main course, up to twelve as an appetizer.*

THE LOBSTER CAKES:

*4 live lobsters, 1 to 1½ lb. each
1 medium shallot, minced fine
1 egg white
½ tsp. salt (preferably sea salt)*

Cayenne pepper

2 Tbs. Armagnac or other brandy

¼ cup heavy cream

½ cup basil leaves sliced in thin chiffonade, plus whole perfect leaves for decoration

2 Tbs. clarified unsalted butter

Have ready a bath of ice and water in a sink or large container. Kill the lobsters by immersing them in a pot of rapidly boiling water for 2 min. Submerge them in the ice water and chill completely.

Shell the lobster tails, claws, and knuckles. Force the meat from the lobster legs by rolling a wine bottle or rolling pin over them. Reserve the bodies and shells. Put the tail meat of two of the lobsters into the work bowl of a food processor with the shallot, egg white, salt, and a pinch of cayenne. Process until very smooth. Add the Armagnac. While processing, add the cream in a steady stream, pausing occasionally to scrape down the work bowl. Dice the remaining tail, claw, and knuckle meat into ¼-in. pieces. In a large bowl, gently combine the diced lobster and the lobster mousse. Chill at least an hour, while you proceed with the lobster coulis (see below).

Reheat the finished lobster coulis. Add the sliced basil to the coulis.

Brush a nonstick skillet with a thin film of the butter and spoon the lobster mixture into the pan to make twelve cakes. (Do this in batches, if necessary.) Brown on both sides over high heat. Reduce the heat and continue cooking 4 min., or until the cakes resist a gentle press. At the last minute, add the lobster leg meat to the pan to warm. Divide the cakes among serving plates lined with lobster coulis. Arrange the leg meat over the cakes. Decorate with whole basil leaves.

THE LOBSTER COULIS:

The body shells and white body frames of two lobsters

¼ cup olive oil

4 cloves garlic, chopped coarse

1 medium leek (white part only), split, washed, and chopped

½ cup sliced carrot

¼ cup chopped celery ribs

1 Tbs. fresh tarragon leaves

2 Tbs. chopped flat-leaf parsley leaves

1 tsp. chopped fresh thyme leaves

2 bay leaves

½ cup Armagnac or other brandy

1 cup dry white wine

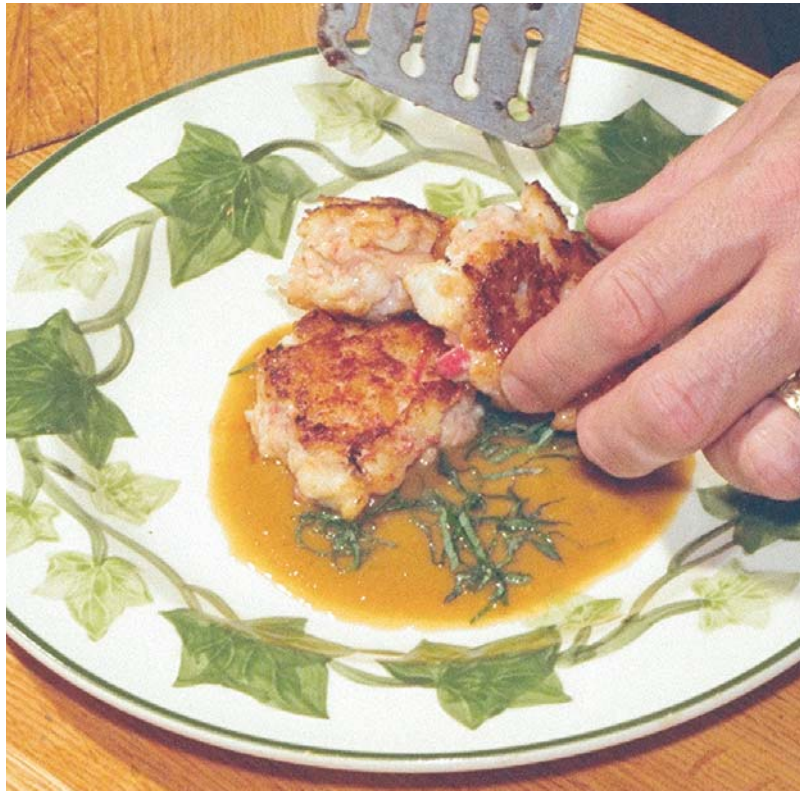
2 lb. fresh plum tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and diced

Salt (preferably sea salt) and cayenne pepper

For easy removal later, keep the shells of the lobster in large pieces, but separate the white body frames from the outer shells. Put the shells, the body frames, and the oil in a large, nonreactive pot or Dutch oven. Sauté 5 min. over medium heat, stirring frequently to avoid scorching. Add the garlic, vegetables (except the tomatoes), and herbs. Continue cooking until the carrots are tender, about 10 min. Add the Armagnac and wine. Simmer to reduce by half. Add the diced tomatoes and simmer 10 min. Remove the lobster shells and bodies with tongs or a slotted spoon, and continue to reduce the sauce until slightly thickened, about 10 min., over medium heat. (Tomatoes with high water content will require longer reduction time.) Cool slightly. Purée in a blender or food processor. Season with salt and a pinch of cayenne.

LOBSTER CHOWDER

I like to add interesting seafood along with the lobster to my chowder, such as steamed mussels, razor clams, tiny Maine shrimp, great Pemaquid oysters, or even a little sea-urchin roe. *Makes 12 cups.*



4 to 6 lobsters, 1 lb. each

Lobster Court Bouillon (see recipe at left)

4 oz. smoky slab bacon, cut into ¼-in. dice

2 medium leeks (white parts only), split, washed and cut into ½-in. dice

2 lb. russet potatoes, peeled and cut into ½-in. dice

1 cup dry white wine

2 cups cream

4 ears fresh sweet corn, scraped (about 2½ cups)

Salt (preferably sea salt) and freshly milled black pepper

Poach the lobsters in court bouillon, following the technique on p. 50. Cool and shell the lobsters, reserving the liquid released during shelling, as well as 2 cups of the court bouillon.

Fry the bacon in a soup pot without scorching. Pour off all but 2 Tbs. of the fat. Add the leeks and potatoes, and stir to coat with the bacon fat. Cook over medium heat for 5 min., stirring frequently, until the leeks are soft. Add the reserved court bouillon and the wine, bring to a boil, and simmer until the potatoes are nearly tender. Add the cream, bring to a boil, and reduce to a simmer. With a sturdy wire whisk or a potato masher, mash about half the potatoes into the liquid to thicken the chowder. Add the scraped sweet corn. Simmer 4 or 5 min., stirring to prevent sticking.

Cut the lobster tail meat into large dice, leaving the knuckles and claws whole. Add the lobster meat and ½ cup of the reserved juices to the chowder. I like to heat the lobster meat and juice in a skillet before adding them to the chowder so that proteins in the lobster don't make the chowder curdle. Add salt and pepper to taste.

No starchy binder

holds these lobster

cakes together, just a

mousse of raw lobster

meat. Served with

fresh basil and lobster

coulis, the delicate

cakes work equally

well as an appetizer or

as a main course.

Sam Hayward is the executive chef at the Harraseeket Inn in Freeport, Maine. He calculates that in twenty years of cooking professionally on the coast of Maine, he has overseen the preparation of more than a hundred thousand lobsters. ♦