



# Coastal Feasting

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A last-minute trip turned out to be an end-of-summer two-week feeding frenzy that started in Boston and traversed the coast of Maine to just shy of the Canadian border.

Anticipating the multitude of ways we would eat lobster as we made our way along Maine's rocky shores, we knew it would be an adventure in local eating. Before heading out on our 3,500-mile road trip we vowed to eat lobster as many ways as possible. Our quest began at our first night's stop in Boston. Limoncello, a quaint Italian restaurant next to Paul Revere's House in Boston's Historic North End, served up a huge plate of delicate lobster ravioli with a light cream sauce. Accompanied by strolling musicians, our 9-year old son devoured the entire plate full, allowing only one taste each for mom and dad.

The next day we entered Maine just in time for lunch. Tipped off by a colleague who lives in the state, our first stop was the lobster shack at Two Lights in Cape Elizabeth. The wait in the long line of tourists did not disappoint. Two Lights' lobster roll is pure lobster meat piled on a toasted, buttered split-top bun with just a dollop of mayonnaise, a style we did not encounter again on our trip (the standard prep is to mix the lobster meat with the mayo). It was perfect. Perhaps it was the unadulterated local lobster meat, or that it was the first lobster roll of the trip, maybe it was the casual yet tidy outdoor seating with seaside views, fresh sea breezes and crashing surf, or all of the above. No matter, the lobster roll rocked and the fried clams blew us away. Huge and tender the clams were more like fried oysters and melted in our mouths. Thus began our coastal feasting expedition and unintentional fourteen-day streak of eating local clams.

We had clams fried, steamed, in “chowdah” (of course), on clam rolls, in ciopinno, and paella. On one particularly dense foggy day, we stumbled upon an extraordinary restaurant in Northeast Harbor. The sign for Bassa Cocina de Tapéo, tucked up a drive between a small boat museum and art gallery, hinted at something different so we stopped for a quick refreshment. A chat with Bassa’s owner, and tour of the restaurant and kitchen, convinced us it was worth the 60-minute trip from our vacation house to return the next evening for dinner. No lobster that night, instead we feasted our way almost entirely through the tempting tapas menu. In addition to exquisite interpretations of traditional Spanish dishes, Bassa’s tapas included local scallops with wasabi Tabeko and delicate Daramiscotta oysters with blood orange aspic and lava salt. We capped the meal by sharing the house specialty – paella with duck and loaded with local scallops, mussels, shrimp, and of course clams – a truly phenomenal meal watched over by an incredibly gracious host.

While the Maine coast offers up a wide variety of shellfish, we gratefully (and tastefully) discovered another treat from its waters – fresh haddock. A firm, mild white fish, haddock can be found on most menus throughout the state. Fried haddock sandwiches are a delicious alternative to a lobster roll. But we found the blackened haddock at The Thirsty Whale in Bar Harbor outstanding. Blackened spice is mixed with cornbread before the haddock is lightly fried. The spicy, lightly crunchy fish served with a cup of their clam chowder was so outstanding we returned a couple of days later for a second helping!

Lest we forget, feasting on lobster *was* the quest of our journey. But before you can eat, those feisty creatures must be caught. Without a doubt the highlight of our trip was the morning spent with Captain Jamie Robertson. We met Captain Robertson and boarded his lobster boat, the Mairi Leigh (named after his mother and wife), at the Milbridge Marina. In a matter of minutes we were in Narraguagus Bay circling his lobster traps, identified among the hundreds of bobbing lobster buoys by his own unique colors. We spent the morning learning to haul up traps, measure lobsters for legal size, check the bait, toss back crabs that had wandered in, reset traps, and watch the horizon for fog that can quickly creep in. We gained an enormous appreciation of how challenging it is to make a living fishing for lobster. Tough and demanding work it is, but watching Captain Robertson stand at the helm of his boat, salty air breezing through the open windshield with a contented smile on his face, it was no surprise when he commented that no matter the weather or conditions, he loves every day he is out on the water. How could he not? In addition to our personal lesson in lobster fishing, we were treated to spectacular granite coastlines, historic Maine’s lighthouses, comical harbor seals sunning on a remote island, the crazy flight of the Atlantic puffin, and the grandeur of the American bald eagle. No doubt Captain Robertson loves what he does, no doubt we have a greater appreciation for this clawed creature of the sea and no doubt we enjoy dining on lobster even more.

During those two weeks we ate lobster rolls at lobster shacks up and down Maine’s coast. In fancier eateries we had curried lobster, lobster cioppino, lobster stew, brandied lobster in puff pastry and lobster paella (yes, another paella!). And of course we had our share of freshly steamed whole lobster. The two-and-a-half pound lobsters at Trenton Bridge Lobster Pound were delicious and memorable in their beastly size, but it was Young’s Lobster Pound in Belfast that offered the authentic Maine experience. Perched on a rocky ledge overlooking the town of Belfast, Young’s is a true working lobster pound. Lobster boats pull up to Young’s dock and unload their daily catch. In an adjacent warehouse the lobsters are sorted according to size into holding tanks with continually circulating fresh seawater. Entering the warehouse from the landside you can pick your live ones to take home or step up to the rustic counter and order your meal. That evening, upon recommendation, we ordered the Maine dinner of whole lobster (size of your choosing), steamers (clams) and corn on the cob all cooked in steaming vats of sea water. With a (BYO) bottle of chilled white wine, we dined dockside for the most memorable meal of our trip watching the sun set and the moon rise over Penobscot Bay.

The last stop of our lobster quest had to be Red’s Eats in Wiscasset. Much like our first stop in Maine, this is a wildly popular lobster shack. Perched right on Highway 1 you have the sound of heavy traffic instead of crashing surf, but we knew it would be something special by the line stretching around the side of the building even though they had not yet opened. Once again we were not disappointed. Undoubtedly, Red’s served the largest lobster roll we encountered with meat from one entire lobster per roll. We ordered ours plain, no mayo. The melted butter on the side was left untouched – the sweet meat of the freshly picked lobster rich enough on its own. It was truly the lobster roll to beat all lobster rolls. Along with, a basket of fried clams was the perfect ending to a two-week coastal feasting frenzy!

Eating our way along the rocky coast of Maine confirmed that fresh local lobster can’t be beat. But this last-minute road trip also revealed that Maine’s waters offer up a bountiful variety of seafood, including oysters, clams, scallops, shrimp, mussels and haddock, that shouldn’t be overlooked. We can’t wait to get back!

