


LOBSTER TALES

THE MASSACHUSETTS LOBSTER FISHERY

By Kezia Bacon-Bernstein and David Casoni



The lobster, and the traditional wood and rope-mesh traps that are used to harvest them, are classic symbols of coastal Massachusetts, evoking our maritime history and our rugged local industries. The lobster itself is the centerpiece of the time-honored New England clambake and a must-have menu choice for townies and tourists alike.

Local lore has it that in the seventeenth century, lobsters were so plentiful that at low tide, Native American tribes would harvest them by hand and grind them into fertilizer to spread on corn crops. Over time, lobster evolved from a “poverty food” in disfavor among the first colonists to a delicacy reserved for special occasions.

These days, the traditional lobster trap, called a “pot,” has been replaced with a more durable, plastic-coated, metal-frame model. The industry too has updated its techniques, making the time-tested methods of catching lobster safer for other marine life and more sustainable altogether.

edible SOUTH SHORE recently spoke with David Casoni, Secretary and Treasurer of the Massachusetts Lobstermen’s Association (MLA). Founded in 1963, the Scituate-based MLA has a long history of helping lobstermen meet the challenges inherent in their work, as well as working to conserve the resources on which these men and women depend.

A Plymouth resident who fishes out of Sandwich on a boat called the *Margaret M.*, Casoni, 64, grew up in Whitman. He worked

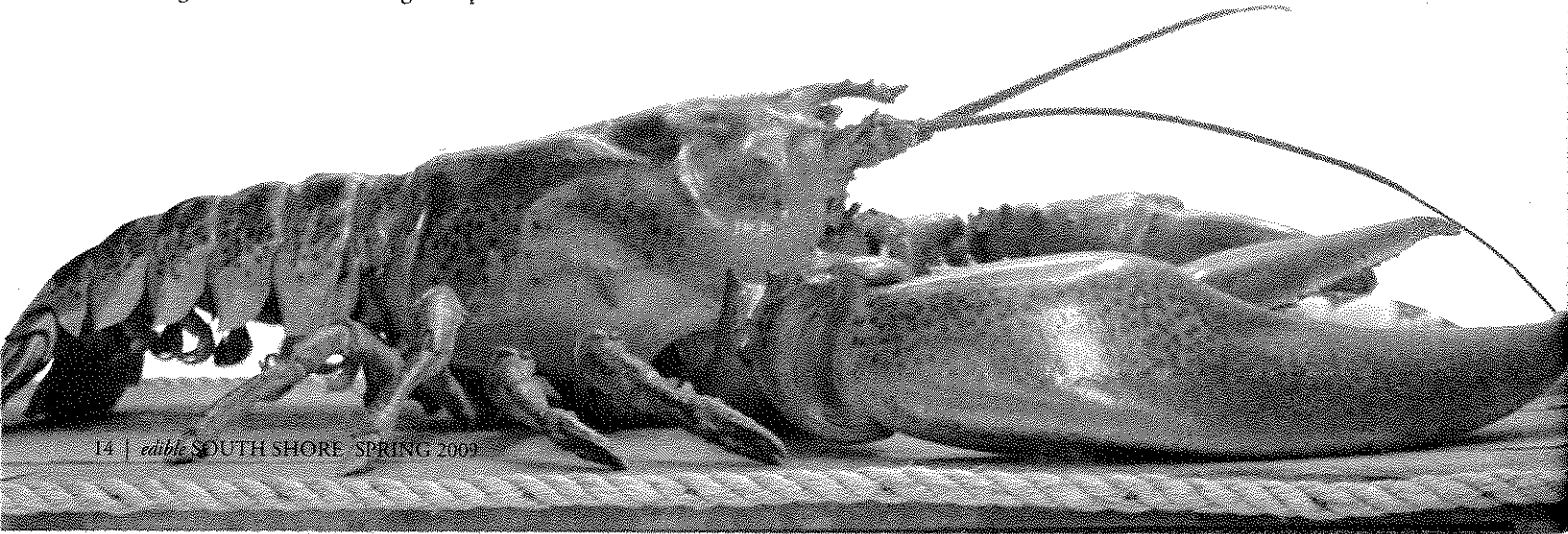
on lobster boats out of Scituate as a boy, but then moved on to other things. “I didn’t get back into it until I took a job teaching. When you’re a teacher, you have to have two jobs. Lobstering beats mowing lawns or painting houses or whatever else teachers do on the side.”

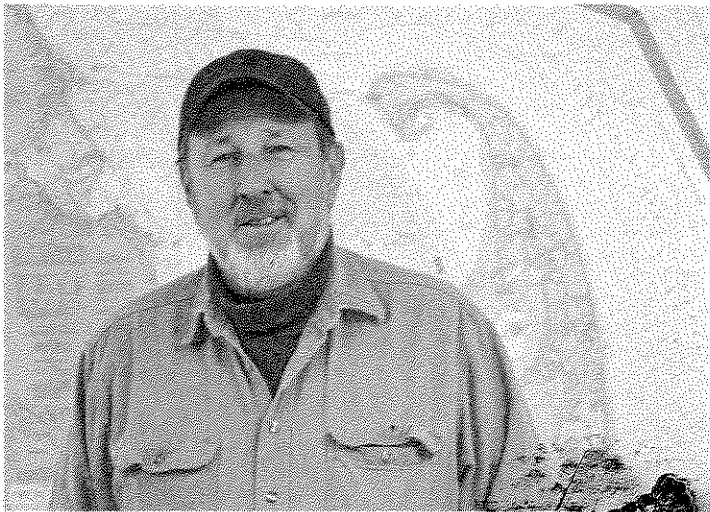
Now retired, Casoni was a popular middle school science teacher in Hanover for 33 years. “I lobstered in part so I could share my ocean experiences with my students,” he says. Casoni adds that he will still lecture “anywhere, anytime, on the lobster industry. I am very passionate about it.”

Former student Andrew Stella of Hanover remembers, “He was so enthusiastic about science and especially ecology that he made the kids in his classes enjoy and learn at the same time.”

“I remember going to the beach on field trips and he would tell us really interesting stuff. I had no idea I was learning...he always made it fun,” recalls Nina (Kennedy) Regan of Braintree.

Casoni has now been in the lobster industry for 34 years. “I am a commercial lobsterman and a licensed captain,” he says. “I work also as the science liaison for the Massachusetts lobster industry, which involves coordinating fishermen with different entities, such as the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF), the National Marine Fishery Service, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, and so on. I work throughout out the whole Gulf of Maine on lobster issues.”





David Casoni

ALL ABOUT LOBSTERING

Homarus americanus, the American Lobster, is a crustacean, with a stiff exoskeleton that must be shed, or *molted*, in order for the animal to grow. It feeds at night, hunting for fish, clams, crabs, mussels, and other sea life. It takes a lobster 5 to 7 years to grow to the size where it becomes legal to harvest it. During this time, a lobster will molt about 25 times.

The natural range of the American Lobster extends from the Canadian Maritime Provinces to New Jersey. However, 90% of the lobsters caught in the United States come from a much smaller area: Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Maine.

Within Massachusetts state waters, the lobster industry is made up of independent fishermen who own and operate their own vessels, ranging in size from 18 to 42 feet. Of the 1300 commercial licenses (limited by the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries), about 900 are active. Some lobstermen fish alone, while others have a crew of one or two sternmen.

The lobstering season runs year-round. "The weather dictates when you go," says Casoni. Another factor is the abundance of the lobsters. "If you see an increase, you go out more frequently," he explains. Casoni himself fishes from mid-spring through December.

There is no such thing as a typical day for a lobsterman. "Your day is determined by a bunch of variables," Casoni explains. "Weather being one. The lobster catch—whether they are moving, feeding, potting."

"At certain times of the year the lobsters are less active, so you are not going every day," he continues. "You can take days off and hopefully a lobster will go into a trap."

A sort of peer pressure plays a role as well. "If I go down to the dock and see everybody loading up to go, I don't want to be the one to sit at the dock," Casoni says.

TO CATCH A LOBSTER

You've seen the traps.

But just how does one go about catching a lobster?

It is the lobsterman's choice how far offshore he goes. "You stay within a range of your capabilities and desires," Casoni explains.

"All of Cape Cod Bay is within state waters," Casoni continues. "You can fish the whole bay. There are lobster boats that fish 100-200 miles offshore that are gone a week at a time. Others are gone and back in the same day—two or ten or twelve miles, staying within a certain geographic region."

Are there rules as to where a certain lobsterman can set his traps?

"We aren't territorial but we defend our territory," Casoni says.

"It's a big ocean out there, but there are concentrated areas that are tough for newcomers to get in."

The traditional method is as follows. Lobster traps are baited with "racks" of fish (the bony parts that remain after the fillets are removed). The traps are connected on the seafloor in 8-20 pot strings, often using a "ground-line" connecting the traps. The gear is connected to the surface by a buoy line, which allows fishermen to locate their traps and haul them to the surface. The traps are checked regularly—anywhere from once a day to once a week—depending on various factors. They are emptied on deck: legal-size lobsters are transferred to a "live tank" storage facility on the boat, while other sea creatures, as well as egg-bearing lobsters or those too small or too large for harvest, are returned to the water.

Massachusetts is the first and only state to require year-round use of sinking ground-lines in all state waters. Ground-lines made of floating rope can rise up in the water column, and thus can entangle large whales and other marine life. Entanglement in fishing gear is a cause of injury and often mortality for large whales. The use of sinking ground-lines reduces this risk. Sinking line is more expensive and wears out faster, but lobstermen in Massachusetts are complying with regulations. Massachusetts lobstermen have removed 3,000 miles of floating rope from the water column since switching to sinking ground-line.

In addition, whales are protected by state requirements such as break-away links at the base of surface buoys, lost gear removal programs, and seasonal gear restrictions in critical right whale habitat in Cape Cod Bay.

You may have seen Massachusetts lobster marked with a green band displaying a "whale tail" logo. The MLA and the DMF have partnered with whale watch companies, the Ocean Conservancy, the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society, local restaurants, fish markets, and seafood dealers on a labeling and promotion program. Many of our state's lobstermen are voluntarily labeling their catch to identify the product as locally caught and to signify their contribution to whale protection.

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How much can the average lobsterman expect to harvest on a typical day? It varies quite a bit, Casoni says. "In May you could set out 200 traps and catch 30 lobsters. In August, you could set out the same 200 traps and catch 150 lobsters, and in another month, 400 lobsters." It is difficult to predict.

There is some control over the maximum catch for each lobsterman, though. Strict mandates are set by state and federal agencies to maintain a sustainable resource. The maximum number of traps is set at 800. Each trap must be identified with a state-issued number, and equipped with an "escape vent" or portal that allows sub-legal lobsters to exit. All egg-bearing lobsters are automatically released by the lobsterman to ensure future stocks. A small notch on the tail flipper, marked by the lobsterman, grants a female protection from harvest, even if no eggs are visible.

Lobsters have to reach a minimum size before harvest. They are measured from the eye socket to the back of the carapace (large body shell). There is also a maximum size on the carapace. These measures vary slightly, depending on the coastal harvesting area, but they range from a minimum of 3 1/4 inches to a maximum of 5 inches. All of these actions—which are supported and often initiated by the industry—work to guarantee sustainability.

And sustainability is important. For the lobstermen, it's a way to help guarantee that their work will continue, year after year.

THE FUTURE OF LOBSTERING

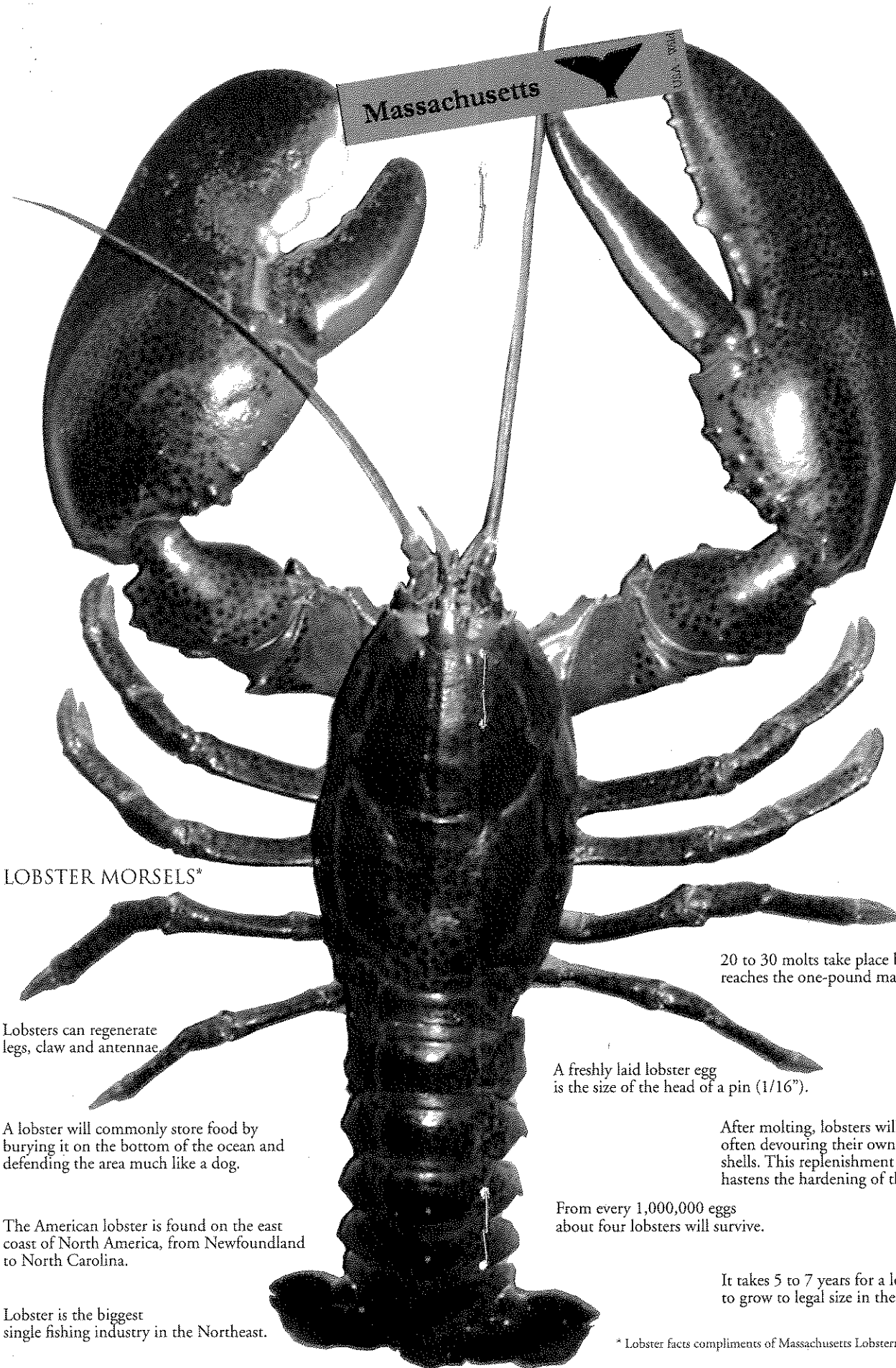
In dollar value, the American Lobster is the number one marine species harvested from Massachusetts state waters. Lobster harvests have increased significantly in size in the past decade. Unlike cod, for example, the lobster fishery is one of the few in our state that remains healthy.

But the costs associated with lobstering have also risen. In the Massachusetts lobster industry, "there are relatively few newcomers," says Casoni.

"The economics of it is not proving to be at all job-worthy," he explains. "The price of lobster has dropped dramatically, while the cost of catching it has skyrocketed." Fuel, bait, dockage, insurance, labor . . . it all adds up.

In the past year alone, the price of lobster has plummeted. In the summer of 2008, the price off the boat was over \$4.00 per pound. But as of February 1 it had dropped to about \$2.75. Most likely it's the poor state of the national economy that's causing the price drop. Lobster is often perceived as a celebration food. With people trying to spend less in general, the demand for lobster has gone down. Ironically, with prices so low, eating lobster could be more economical than eating bologna! 🍷

For more information on Massachusetts lobster, the Whale Tail logo, and more, please visit www.lobstermen.com.



LOBSTER MORSELS*

Lobsters can regenerate legs, claw and antennae.

A lobster will commonly store food by burying it on the bottom of the ocean and defending the area much like a dog.

The American lobster is found on the east coast of North America, from Newfoundland to North Carolina.

Lobster is the biggest single fishing industry in the Northeast.

20 to 30 molts take place before a lobster reaches the one-pound market size.

A freshly laid lobster egg is the size of the head of a pin (1/16").

After molting, lobsters will eat voraciously, often devouring their own recently vacated shells. This replenishment of lost calcium hastens the hardening of the new shell.

From every 1,000,000 eggs about four lobsters will survive.

It takes 5 to 7 years for a lobster to grow to legal size in the ocean.

* Lobster facts compliments of Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association, Inc.

Grilled Lobster Bake in a Snap:

- 1 cup water
- 2 pounds seaweed
- 4 lobsters – 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 pounds each
- 1 1/2 pounds steamer clams
- 1 1/2 pounds mussels
- 16 jumbo raw shrimp
- 2 lemons, sliced thin
- 1 cup melted butter

Preheat grill.

Place deep sided baking pan on grill.

Pour water in pan (for steaming).

Spread 1/2 of the seaweed on the baking pan.

Place lobsters, clams, mussels and shrimp on top of the seaweed.

Spread lemon slices over the seafood.

Cover with the rest of the seaweed.

Turn grill to low and close the cover.

Lobster bake should be done in 15-20 minutes

or when the clams and mussels are open.

Serve with melted butter.

Serves 4

Compliments of Massachusetts Lobstermen's Association, Inc.

