

LABOR OF LOBSTER

by Michael Ruscoe

NICK & ARLENE CRISMALE

TALK LOBSTER SHACK & THE LOBSTERMEN

OF LONG ISLAND SOUND

For Nick and Arlene Crismale, owning and operating the Lobster Shack on the shores of East Haven is more than a mere labor of love. It's a labor of lobster, an offshoot of a Connecticut tradition that goes back hundreds of years.

According to Nick, a one-time North Branford police officer turned full-time lobsterman, there was a day and age when “you could go to any (coastal) town, whether it be Milford, Stratford, New London, and wherever you went, there'd be lobster boats in every harbor. There were families of lobstermen.

“We would have boats all over the place out here,” he said. “We would meet the New York guys. It was unbelievable. And the chatter on the radio—people would listen in their boats just to listen to us talk back and forth, because we would be joking. We had a great time. You looked forward to going out every day.”

After leaving the North Branford police force in 1980, Nick started his business with 50 traps, and over a period of ten years, grew to harvesting with 2,000 traps. Eventually, Arlene, freshly retired from the phone company, got into the business by selling fresh lobster rolls from a trailer parked in a Branford Marina.

“We had access to lobster meat, obviously,” Nick said. “We’d come in a pick some lobster meat for her for the next day. And then, all of a sudden, she started selling more and more. She got a little bit of publicity on it, and it just took off, and we graduated to a larger trailer.”

“It was a little hobby,” Arlene said, “and then it just mushroomed.”



The Crismales, who have been married for 51 years, continued in the lobster business, catching them, cooking them, even wholesaling them until the lobsters in Long Island Sound suddenly began dying en masse.

“We believe it was from the pesticides that they sprayed for West Nile Virus,” Nick said. “It went into the water and lobsters became collateral damage. I was optimistically trying to do that for a few more years, but by around 2007, the reality was that you couldn’t make a living at it anymore.”

“They were using all these chemicals,” Arlene said, “and they didn’t even know what the heck they were doing. Lobsters are like bugs. They’re the bugs of the ocean. Pesticides just kill them. They were getting washed up onto the beach.

“Who would think,” she said, “with the Sound being as large as it is, the dilution would have impacted it? (But) it didn’t take much to offset the whole physiology

of the lobster. They were prematurely shedding their shells. It upset the whole balance.”

“It was pretty devastating,” Nick said. “I was a first-generation fisherman, but there were a lot of guys who were second and third generation who lost their living.

“I know some of the fisherman who were around, they left the state and just couldn’t deal with it,” Nick said. “Some became alcoholics because they just couldn’t deal with the loss. That was all they knew. Some of them lost their boats—when the mortgages were on their boats, they just couldn’t make it. It was just devastating.”

Despite the mass lobster die-off in the Sound, the Crismales managed to stay in the business. Having graduated to a larger lobster roll trailer, they decided to take the plunge as full-time restaurateurs and bought the former Beach Head restaurant. The building, in Nick’s words, was “a little run down,” but after lots of renovation, the Crismales began selling their locally famous lobster rolls to the residents of East Haven.



The renovations include an upstairs floor with a deck overlooking the beach. “In the summertime, everyone wants to be on the deck,” Arlene said. “It’s the most beautiful view.” The second floor of the Lobster Shack also features a jazz brunch on Sundays with live music.

Last autumn, the Crismales made the decision to keep the once-seasonal restaurant open year-round as a way to retain and reward their staff. It was a challenge to get through the off-season, when many of their regular customers were out of the state for the winter. But both Nick and Arlene said it was worth it.

“We’re like family here,” Arlene said. The people in our kitchen are amazing, and you have to let them know they’re amazing. You have to let them know how much you appreciate them. And our staff is independent—they don’t need us here. But we’re still here because the people that come in, they want to see you, they want to know you’re here.”

With fresh lobster now coming in from Massachusetts, Maine, and Canada, the Crismales expect a very busy spring and summer. “We got through the tough winter,” said Arlene. Now that spring has come, “it’ll be fine,” she said.

Nick, one of the last of the Long Island lobstermen, agrees. “I don’t think many people who are in it clearly for profit would have sustained themselves through the winter like we did,” he said. “Some weeks it cost us money to be here. But we knew we were building something. We took that chance and made it through the winter.

“Once the summer comes, we do very well,” he said, displaying the same fortitude that made the Connecticut lobster business thrive for generations. “It was worth the sacrifice.”