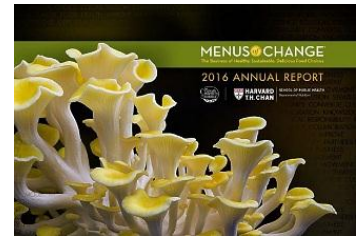


MENUS CHANGE®

From the 2016 Menus of Change Annual Report



CASE STUDIES

Emerging Chain Spotlight: Luke's Lobster

TRAP TO TABLE

When walking into Luke's Lobster, a "taste the source" chalkboard on the wall indicates the exact harbor where the lobster in the lobster roll was caught. The server at the counter will then explain that, for example, Stonington is located in Downeast Maine, and it is named after old rock quarries, which used to be a big part of the economy that today relies more on lobstering. You'll then hear about the sustainable fishery management practices the Stonington lobstermen abide by, which include throwing egg-bearing female lobsters back into the water, but only after first v-notching their tail flippers. That indicates to any future lobsterman who pulls her up at a time when she doesn't have eggs that she's a good breeder, so he'll toss her back as well to keep her in the population. Finally, when you receive your lobster roll, your receipt will list more information about the harbor of origin and sustainable fishing practices.



In a time of pervasive mislabeling of seafood—and a new Presidential Task Force on Combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing and Seafood Fraud (see [page 31](#))—this fast casual seafood restaurant group is founded on the principles of sustainability and traceability. The Maine-style lobster shack was started in 2009 and now has 19 locations in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, DC, Chicago, and Las Vegas. Luke's is a fully vertically integrated company, owning and carefully controlling everything that happens from the dock to the plate. "It's the same transparency as if you were in a traditional Maine lobster shack sitting right on the dock where the seafood was landed," says Ben Conniff, co-founder and president.

Luke's even built its own seafood processing company, Cape Seafood, to process its five million pounds of lobster annually.

Along with allowing greater control over quality, having its own processing facility also enables the company to optimize taste. Conniff explains: "As soon as you take that lobster out of its habitat, it's not moving the way it is supposed to; it's not in water of the correct temperature; the salinity is off; it's not eating its normal diet. All those things contribute to the flavor and texture of the meat. So rather than trying to keep lobster alive as it's shipped around the country, we cook it at its freshest possible moment." The tail cooks faster than the knuckles and claws, so using a convection steamer, Luke's cooks each piece to the texture and temperature that will lock in the best possible flavor for that piece, which has been carefully graded by size. "Guests are really

blown away by the level of flavor, the sweetness, the tender texture of the meat,” Conniff continues, “because they’re used to eating lobster that somebody brought home and threw the whole lobster in the pot and boiled or steamed it until it was pretty red and they said, ‘OK, it’s done.’”

Luke’s sources the lobster for all its locations from the Maine lobster fishery 70 percent of the year. The exceptions are May-June and December, when it sources from Canadian fisheries because those are especially active during those times of year, while the Maine lobster fishery is slower. Doing so helps prevent over-fishing.

“Sustainability for us is about committing to practices that ensure the population of the species is maintained and growing at rates that a lobsterman’s children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren will have as good of a chance of making a living on that resource as a lobsterman today does,” Conniff says. It just so happens that that long-sighted business incentive of ensuring the viability of the local economy coincides with what’s best for the environment: preserving and even growing the population of Maine lobster, which has tripled in the last 20 years.

In the restaurants, it’s all about flavor. When Luke’s team developed the recipe for its lobster roll, its bestseller, it didn’t go light on mayonnaise or butter due to health concerns, but because it wanted to showcase the quality of the lobster. Health was not a leading focus when Conniff and Luke Holden (cofounder and CEO) started the business. Like many other types of seafood, lobster is a healthy source of protein with omega-3 oils and other vitamins and minerals. And now, they realize, especially with their fast-casual format, the health benefits may be the secret to transforming lobster from something Americans eat only on special occasions or very infrequently to something they eat every week.

In addition to lobster rolls, which are \$16, the menu includes crab and shrimp rolls, soups, and a winter “Tail & Kale” salad at \$14 that was a big seller: a whole steamed, chilled lobster tail on a bed of baby kale, a scoop of hot quinoa, a scoop of chickpeas, topped with roasted pumpkin seeds and pickled onions, and dressed with poppyseed vinaigrette. In light of this success, Luke’s will continue to offer a rotation of seasonal salads.

Do customers bristle at these price points for sandwiches and salads? Initially, some did. But as diners learn everything that has gone into bringing them their lobster roll—the lobsterman waking up at dawn, pulling up traps one by one, carefully handling each lobster one by one to make sure it stays alive from the boat to the dock to the processing facility, then the painstaking grading and cooking of each piece to its optimal specifications, having third party and government organizations inspect for food safety and quality, and finally sending the lobster out to restaurants, where time is invested to educate and train servers about sustainable fishery practices so they can talk with customers about what they’re eating—their sticker shock turns to appreciation. A willingness to pay “what the food is really worth,” Conniff says. Whether that insight is a sign of where fast casual cuisine is headed more broadly, it seems the writing is literally on the wall.



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