Consider the Lobster

For 56 years, the Maine Lobster Festival has been drawing crowds with the promise of sun, fun, and fine food. One visitor would argue that the celebration involves a whole lot more.

BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

The enormous, pungent, and extremely well-marketed Maine Lobster Festival is held every late July in the state’s midcoast region, meaning the western side of Penobscot Bay, the nerve center of Maine’s lobster industry. What’s called the midcoast runs from Owl’s Head and Thomaston in the south to Belfast in the north. (Actually, it might extend all the way up to Bucksport, but we were never able to get farther than Belfast on Route 1, whose summer traffic is, as you can imagine, unimaginable.) The region’s two main communities are Camden, with its very old money and yachty harbor and five-star restaurants and phenomenal B&Bs, and Rockland, a serious old fishing town that hosts the Festival every summer in historic Harbor Park, right along the water.

Tourism and lobster are the midcoast region’s two main industries, and they’re both warm-weather enterprises, and the Maine Lobster Festival represents less an intersection of the industries than a deliberate collision, joyful and lucrative and loud. The assigned subject of this article is the 56th Annual MLF, July 30 to August 3, 2003, whose official theme was “Lighthouses, Laughter, and Lobster.” Total paid attendance was over 80,000, due partly to a national CNN spot in June during which a Senior Editor of a certain other epicurean magazine hailed the MLF as one of the best food-themed festivals in the world. 2003 Festival highlights: concerts by Lee Ann Womack and Orleans, annual Maine Sea Goddess beauty pageant, Saturday’s big parade, Sunday’s William G. Atwood Memorial Crate Race, annual Amateur Cooking Competition, carnival rides and midway attractions and food booths, and the MLF’s Main Eating Tent, where something over 25,000 pounds of fresh-caught Maine lobster is consumed after preparation in the World’s Largest Lobster Cooker near the grounds’ north entrance. Also available are lobster rolls, lobster turnovers, lobster sauté, Down East lobster salad, lobster bisque, lobster ravioli, and deep-fried lobster dumplings. Lobster Thermidor is obtainable at a sit-down restaurant called The Black Pearl on Harbor Park’s northwest wharf. A large all-pine booth sponsored by the Maine Lobster Promotion Council has free pamphlets with recipes, eating tips, and Lobster Fun Facts. The winner of Friday’s Amateur Cooking Competition prepares Saffron Lobster Ramekins, the recipe for which is available for public downloading at www.mainelobsterfestival.com. There are lobster T-shirts and lobster bobblehead dolls and inflatable lobster pool toys and clamp-on lobster hats with big scarlet claws that wobble on springs. Your assigned correspondent saw it all, accompanied by one girlfriend and both his own parents—one of which parents was actually born and raised in Maine, albeit in the extreme northern inland part, which is potato country and a world away from the touristic midcoast.

1 There’s a comprehensive native apothegm: “Camden by the sea, Rockland by the smell.”

2 N.B. All personally connected parties have made it clear from the start that they do not wish to be talked about in this article.