

Have Your Lobster and Eat It, Too

By **Trevor Corson** / Special To The Tab

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Lobster love is going mainstream: Executives at Whole Foods Market, the largest purveyor of natural and organic foods in the nation, have reevaluated the entire process of lobster acquisition, transport and sale. The company has announced that it will stop selling live lobsters because it cannot ensure that the animals are being treated with compassion.

For tens of thousands of years we knew, firsthand, where our food came from. During the past century, 99.9 percent of that experience has vanished. Lobster is one of the few foods that most Americans can still purchase alive and kicking. Apart from hunting and fishing, it is the last link between our kitchens and the great outdoors.

I belong to a new demographic called ethical eaters. We want our food to have been happy in death. At the same time, we want it so fresh and unprocessed that it still tastes, and nourishes us, like it is full of life. That's why I love buying live lobster. I am happy knowing that the lobster has lived at least six or seven years in the ocean. Most other meat at the store comes from a domesticated animal, and fish increasingly come from farms. Lobster is one of the last true free-range meats.

Some people feel that the entire process of capturing, storing, transporting and cooking lobsters cannot possibly be accomplished in a humane fashion - period.

The fact is that trapping lobsters is as humane as fishing gets. The animals crawl into a wire cage, eat a free lunch and sit around for a while. We know from video studies that many of the lobsters then climb right back out of the trap. We also know from scientific surveys that most lobstermen along the rocky coast from Gloucester to Downeast Maine release a lot of their lobsters back into the ocean - young ones, old ones and ones with eggs - and that those animals continue to thrive and repopulate coastal waters, despite their elevator rides to the surface and their swims back to the bottom. Lobster transport is similarly civilized. Because consumers have traditionally demanded that lobsters be kept alive, distributors already have a strong incentive to treat the animals with care. Nova Scotia-based Clearwater Seafoods, one of the top lobster distributors in North America, has constructed elaborate seawater condominiums at its three plants, tended by the company's own biologists, so that lobsters can rest in cool, stress-free solitude and regain energy before their trek to the consumer.

And storage? It is true that adult lobsters dislike spending much time together in close quarters - unless, of course, a male and female have completed their courtship dances and decide to move in together to mate. But lobsters communicate by smell instead of sound, and studies at the Marine Biological Laboratory on Cape Cod suggest that in crowded conditions, the lobsters' noses get desensitized to stimulation and they calm down and stop bothering one another. The tanks are also kept cold; the

lobsters adapt by slowing their metabolism, reducing activity and lowering their food intake, just as they do in the wild, which further reduces stress.

That leaves cooking. It's the thornier problem, and what most upsets people. Unlike fish, [lobsters] can survive out of water long enough to make it to the kitchen still kicking.

In England, scientists have invented a new machine designed to kill lobsters with minimum pain prior to cooking. It is called the CrustaStun, and went into service in the United Kingdom last year. It comes in two sizes. The big one looks something like those zappers they put your suitcase in at the airport. Lobsters ride a conveyor belt into a 110-volt jolt that electrocutes them. The small version looks like a stainless-steel lobster coffin, and executes one animal at a time. Both get a humane stamp of approval.

Shucks Maine Lobster, run by Maine entrepreneur John Hathaway, is one of several companies employing a different sort of device: an 80,000-pound, 16-foot-tall machine that uses technology adapted from U.S. Army research. Hathaway loads a wide vertical cylinder with 200 pounds of live lobster at a time. A steel oval framework slides into place over the cylinder. He presses a button, massive pumps whir, and water inside the cylinder is compressed to a pressure more than five times that of the deepest ocean trenches. Without any heat, the lobsters die and their meat separates from the shell. The lobsters are then hand shucked, vacuum sealed, and the packages re-pressurized to kill pathogens. The result: fresh, raw lobster meat with a refrigerated shelf life of up to 30 days and no additives or preservatives - similar to chicken. Chefs love the product, and supermarkets are currently considering it for retail sale. Whether this system will get a humane stamp of approval remains to be seen.

I welcome the end of boiling lobsters alive. But I also fear the impending loss of live lobster, and with it the end of a beloved New England tradition. I do not want to hand over my last chance to make moral choices about my dinner to automated executioners. So for now, I will continue to do what I have always done. I will put the live lobster on ice for 15 minutes to slow its metabolism and neural activity. Then I will give thanks to the lobster and thrust the point of my knife between its legs and cut down through the head, splitting the front half of its body. The animal will die instantly, and I can boil it without causing further pain. This method, while not for the squeamish, does get a humane stamp of approval.

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Trevor Corson is the author of "The Secret Life of Lobsters: How Fishermen and Scientists Are Unraveling the Mysteries of Our Favorite Crustacean" (HarperCollins, June 2004). He has posted instructions on the humane way to kill lobsters at secretlifeoflobsters.com.

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