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SEAFOOD SHACKS

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America's best seafood shacks
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ON THE COVER

Shrimp Shack, Seaside, Florida

Located on Florida's northwestern Gulf Coast, the town of Seaside is a modern-day throwback to bygone America. Seeing its whitewashed cottages, powdery beaches, and congenial residents, visitors may think they've arrived on a movie set—and in fact, Seaside did serve as the backdrop for the 1998 film *The Truman Show*. For more on Seaside, the Shrimp Shack, and 21 other seafood joints across the country, see page 114.



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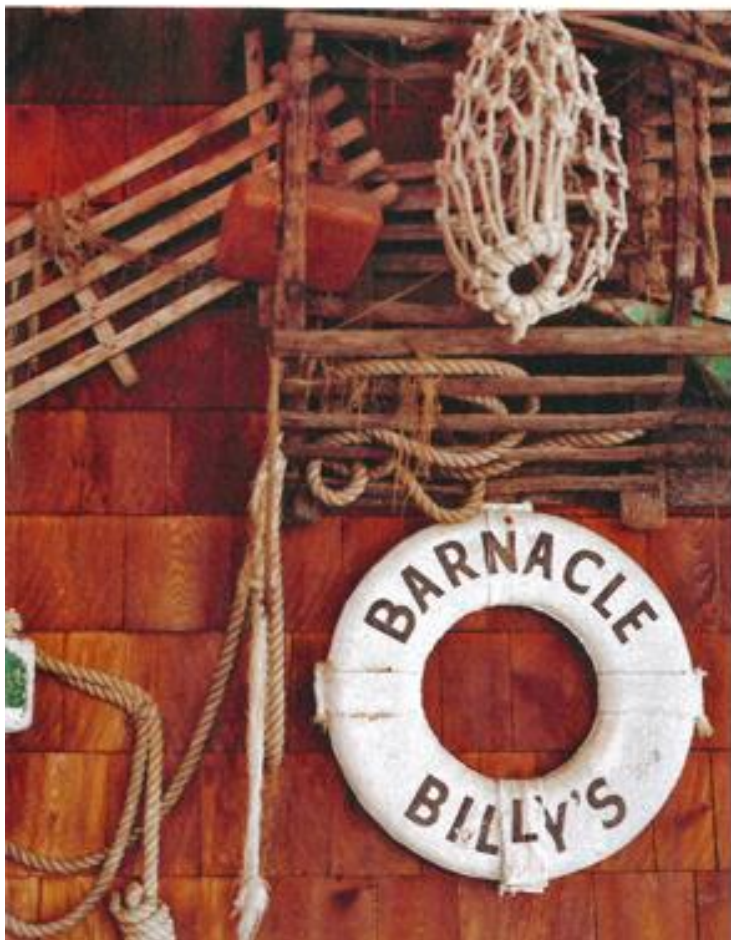
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SURF-TO-TABLE DINING Clockwise from above left: The Shrimp Shack's dining pavilion; fresh lobster from Barnacle Billy's Restaurant, in Ogunquit, Maine; the Shrimp Shack's Apalachicola oysters three ways; nautical gear at Barnacle Billy's.



What's so special about eating by the

water? Oftentimes, not much. The majority of waterfront restaurants are frankly terrible, cashing in on the scenery with overcooked food, half-baked décor, underhanded prices, and watered-down margaritas. Worse, many of those touting "local seafood" source their catch from overseas.

All of which means the great ones are a rare and welcome exception. I'm talking about places that make the most of not only their setting—on a beach, a bay, an estuary, a lake—but also of the local bounty, be it with briny oysters or littleneck clams, boiled crawfish or fried soft-shell crabs, spicy fish tacos or buttery lobster rolls.

For the past few summers I've been circling the nation's coastline, exploring the many subzones of our endlessly regionalized waterside dining culture, from Puget Sound to Long Island Sound, the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes. On the whole I've had more mediocre food than good. But there were plenty of places that got it right, achieving with a premise so simple and obvious—selling seafood by the seashore—a kind of magic.

Something happens to people, and to the way they eat, near bodies of water. The beer gets hoppier, the polos brighter, the puns cornier. (In Chesapeake Bay I spotted five DON'T BOTHER ME, I'M FEELING CRABBY T-shirts in as many days.) Women let their hair down; men grow goatees and start dressing like Jimmy Buffett. Maybe they'll wear a pirate-motif bandanna. Maybe they'll tie one on their dog. To a nonbeliever this all might come off as kitsch, but there's nothing ironic about it. Seafood shacks are the furthest thing from hipster-cool, and that's precisely what makes them so appealing. The lobster traps may be decorative, but the sincerity is genuine.

The humblest spots are usually the best. Places like the Shrimp Shack, in Seaside, Florida, which serves peel-and-eat Gulf shrimp, sweet as candy, on a breezy pavilion by the beach. (Royal Red shrimp, talcum-white sand, cobalt-blue water: how American can you get?) Or Iggy's Doughboys & Chowder House, on Rhode Island's Narragansett Bay, where the clam cake is as tasty as people say, and the quahogs come from just up the shore. Or Malibu, California's 34-year-old Malibu Seafood, a slacker-surfer joint on the Pacific Coast Highway, whose moist and flaky fish sandwich is a bargain at \$5.95.

Some waterfront shacks may appear humble, but spent a boatload of money to look the part. North of San Francisco, on Tomales Bay (source of California's finest oysters), restaurateur Pat Kuleto invested over \$13 million in renovating Nick's Cove, a rustic, 1930's-era fishing lodge, until it resembled...a rustic, 1930's-era fishing lodge. Decked out with maritime detritus—buoys; crab pots; mounted marlin—the restaurant still seems held together with sailor's rope and fishing wire. And given the stirring views (that's Hog Island right out the window), the food is way better

than it has to be: pristine Californian halibut, smoky Manila clam chowder, and, of course, expertly shucked oysters, served chilled with a jalapeño-and-cilantro mignonette or barbecued in a tangy chipotle sauce (surprisingly addictive). Kuleto is in the process of selling to new owners, who one hopes will retain the folksy roadhouse vibe. In the meantime Nick's draws a regular crowd of workaday guys in overalls and hippie Marin gals; they stay late into the night at the worn mahogany bar, bonding over pints of Lagunitas IPA and platters of Hog Islands.

But here's the catch: while waterfront

restaurants make a point of being all democratic and convivial, they can be dauntingly inscrutable, even forbidding, to an outsider. First of all, the best ones are often hard to find, at least if you're not arriving by boat. Sometimes it seems they don't want to be found. I once got lost for hours on the craggy reaches of Maine's Midcoast, near Georgetown, looking for a place called Lisa's Lobster House, which finally materialized at the end of a rural road straight out of *Deliverance*, complete with washing machines rusting in front yards. The quest was worth it for Lisa's lobster roll, and the unexpectedly majestic view of Sheepscot Bay. (Sadly, Lisa's has since closed. Perhaps it was too difficult to find.)

Second, once you do arrive, eating may pose a challenge in itself. Any rube can figure out how to dress a hot dog or fold a slice of pizza. But extracting a meal's worth of nourishment from a Dungeness crab? That's something. No wonder they print instructions on the place mats. This is food that makes you work, demanding Zen-like patience and a whole learned tradition of skills. A grown man can derive an inordinate sense of achievement from dismantling a six-ounce crustacean with his bare hands. As for the grown man who can't do the job? Trust me, it's humiliating.

Then there's the baffling argot of regional nicknames, recalling 1950's greaser slang: "busters," "pistols," "punks," "chix," "softs." (Respective translations: a molting crab; a clawless lobster; a roe-bearing female crab; a one-pound lobster; a soft-shell crab, lobster, or clam.)

Finally, there are your fellow customers, who know the ropes far better than you, because they've probably been coming here forever. Like adult oysters, which tend to affix themselves to a single rock or riverbed and feed there for life, humans can be stubbornly parochial about their watery haunts. In Essex, Massachusetts, I met a guy who'd been coming to J.T. Farnham's marsh-side shack for 53 summers, ever since his grandfather took him when he was a boy. "Best fried clams in New England," he assured me. I asked if he'd ever tried the near-identical-looking clam shack down the road, which had been there since 1914. He gave me a look that said, *Why would I? Why indeed.* »