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Bob's Clam Hut

At this Maine favorite, it's not just the fried seafood that's legendary.

BY AMY TRAVERSO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MEREDITH PERDUE



The parking lot at Bob's Clam Hut on U.S. Route 1—where the view is of pines and marshes but also the Nine West outlet across the street—is packed with cars hailing from Maine down to Florida. It's another bustling Kittery day, and outlet shoppers are loading up on discount sneakers and enamel cookware, enough to stoke an appetite for fried clams and lobster rolls. So even though the weather is cold and the sky is a dull milky gray, there's a line at the walk-up window.

Robert and Betty Kraft founded their roadside stand in 1956, long before Dexter and Dansk made their incursion. The town was never particularly touristy, owing to the naval shipyards, but the restaurant had enough local traction to stay open year-round. Big-bellied clams came in fresh every day and were tossed in a mix of corn and wheat flour, then fried in clean oil. They didn't even add salt, which Bob believed masked the taste of the sea. The lobster rolls were always sweet and ample, and the chowder had just the right mix of cream and brine. When Michael Landgarten came along to buy the business in 1986, his main ambition was to change nothing, other than expanding the dining room and adding more windows. "There was a big love affair between Bob and Betty and the town," Landgarten says. "They were so honored to cook for the town and took it so seriously. I walked into a Norman Rockwell painting in a real way."

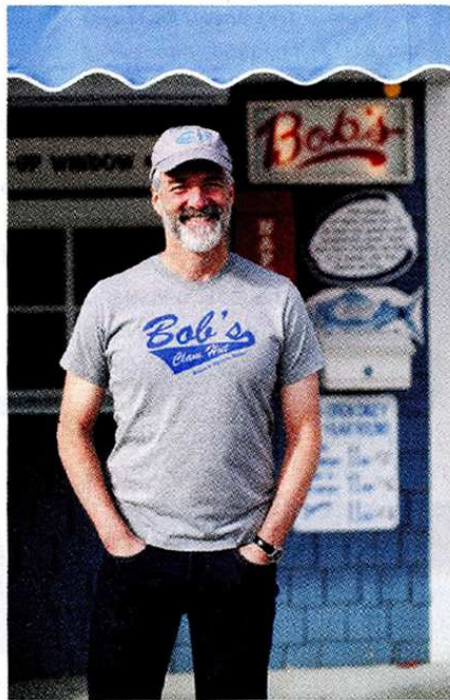
At the walk-up window inside, there's another painting: a portrait of an old woman in a red blouse, reading glasses in hand. Next to her, a cartoony speech bubble reads, "What'll ya have?"

This is Lillian Mangos, who stood at that counter six days a week for nearly 25 years and developed such a following that her line was usually twice as long as the others. She arrived in 1986, the same year as Landgarten, having already run three restaurants with her husband, and she had opinions. “She yelled at me for four years, ‘You’ve got to put the clams in an egg wash before you bread them,’” Landgarten says. “I said, ‘We’re not

Lillian Mangos developed such a following that her line was twice as long as the others.

going to change that recipe. It’s a great recipe.” He smiles. Lil could wear the shine off a diamond if she set her mind to it, and he wasn’t going to win this one. “Eventually I gave way and added them to the menu as ‘Lillian’s Style’ and gave her 15 cents for every order.”

The dueling clam recipes caught the attention of producers for Guy Fieri’s *Diners, Drive-Ins & Dives* show on the Food Network, and in 2010 the spiky-haired maestro showed up to tape a



segment. Lillian was 84, still hawking her clams, and she charmed the pants off Fieri. At the show’s climax, Fieri led a Bob’s-versus-Lillian’s smack-down. He tasted them plain, then with tartar sauce. He praised Lillian’s for their “crunchification.” But in a surprise twist, he about-faced and chose Bob’s. “And it’s killing me because I like Lillian a lot better than you,” he told Landgarten. In the clip, Lillian seems less disappointed than dismayed

OPPOSITE: The spirit of longtime seafood chef Lillian Mangos still presides over Bob’s Clam Hut.

INSET: Bob’s was established in Kittery, Maine, in 1956.

THIS PAGE, LEFT: Current owner Michael Landgarten. BOTTOM: Lillian’s fried-clam recipe (egg wash before breading, for “crunchification”) vs. Bob’s original (no eggwash).

by Fieri’s lack of judgment. The man clearly didn’t know his clams.

Lillian’s star turn only enhanced her celebrity, and her line grew twice as long through the following summer. “She was in heaven,” Landgarten says. Then, a tragedy. Ten months after the show aired, Lillian suffered a stroke on New Year’s Day. She lingered for two more years, in and out of the hospital and rehabilitation center, but buoyed by letters from her fans. She died in January 2013. At the end of that year, Landgarten opened a hip little café in downtown Kittery serving espresso and fresh crullers good enough to make a seaman jump ship. He named it Lil’s. 🍷

Have you been to Bob’s Clam Hut? Tweet us @yankeemagazine, using #yankeeflavor.



Bob’s Clam Hut, 315 U.S. Route 1, Kittery, ME. 207-439-4233; bobsclamhut.com

Lil’s Café, 7 Wallingford Square, Kittery, ME. 207-703-2800; lilscafe.com



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