

BOILING POINT

First it was veal. Then foie gras. Now animal rights activists, ethical eaters, and even Whole Foods executives are targeting a new evil—your lobster dinner.

By Trevor Corson

THE TERRORISTS STRUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. The lobsterman's traps were piled in his boathouse by the shore, and his fishing boat moored nearby. His family had been catching lobsters for five generations. He was a single father, raising two sons, ages nine and eleven. The terrorists tore off the front of the building, smashed parts of the boat, ripped the traps to pieces, and released a crowd of live lobsters back into the sea. "The war against the lobster industry has begun," the perpetrators announced in an e-mail. "We will attack anywhere, at any time." No animal should be boiled alive, they said. It was signed: the Lobster Liberation Front. In the two years since the incident, the attacks have spread to other harbors along the southern coast of England. So far, the lobster war has not reached Cape Cod or Marblehead or Maine. But that seems only a matter of time. Sympathy for lobsters is clearly building. In 2003, a last-minute amendment prevented the government of Canada from passing an animal welfare law that would have made cooking a live lobster a crime, punishable by up to five years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. This year the British and Scottish parliaments have considered expanding animal welfare laws to include crustaceans. Jurisdictions in

Australia and New Zealand have already moved to grant lobsters greater protection. A town in Italy has outlawed the boiling of live lobsters, calling it "useless torture."

A U.S. Supreme Court justice has even considered the topic. In 1993, in a case dealing with ritual sacrifice of live animals by the descendants of a Nigerian Yoruba religious group, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wondered aloud if the boiling of live lobsters could be banned under the local ordinance.

Here in New England, boiling live lobsters is a tradi-

tion—the Yoruba have their rituals, and we have ours. But soon the innocent pleasure of dunking a steaming chunk of claw meat in butter could be considered unthinkably barbaric and taken away from us. Lobster love is going mainstream: Executives at Whole Foods Market, the largest purveyor of natural and organic foods in the nation, are re-evaluating the entire process of lobster acquisition, transport, and sale—from trap to table. If they can't find a way to treat live lobsters with compassion, the company's stores will stop selling

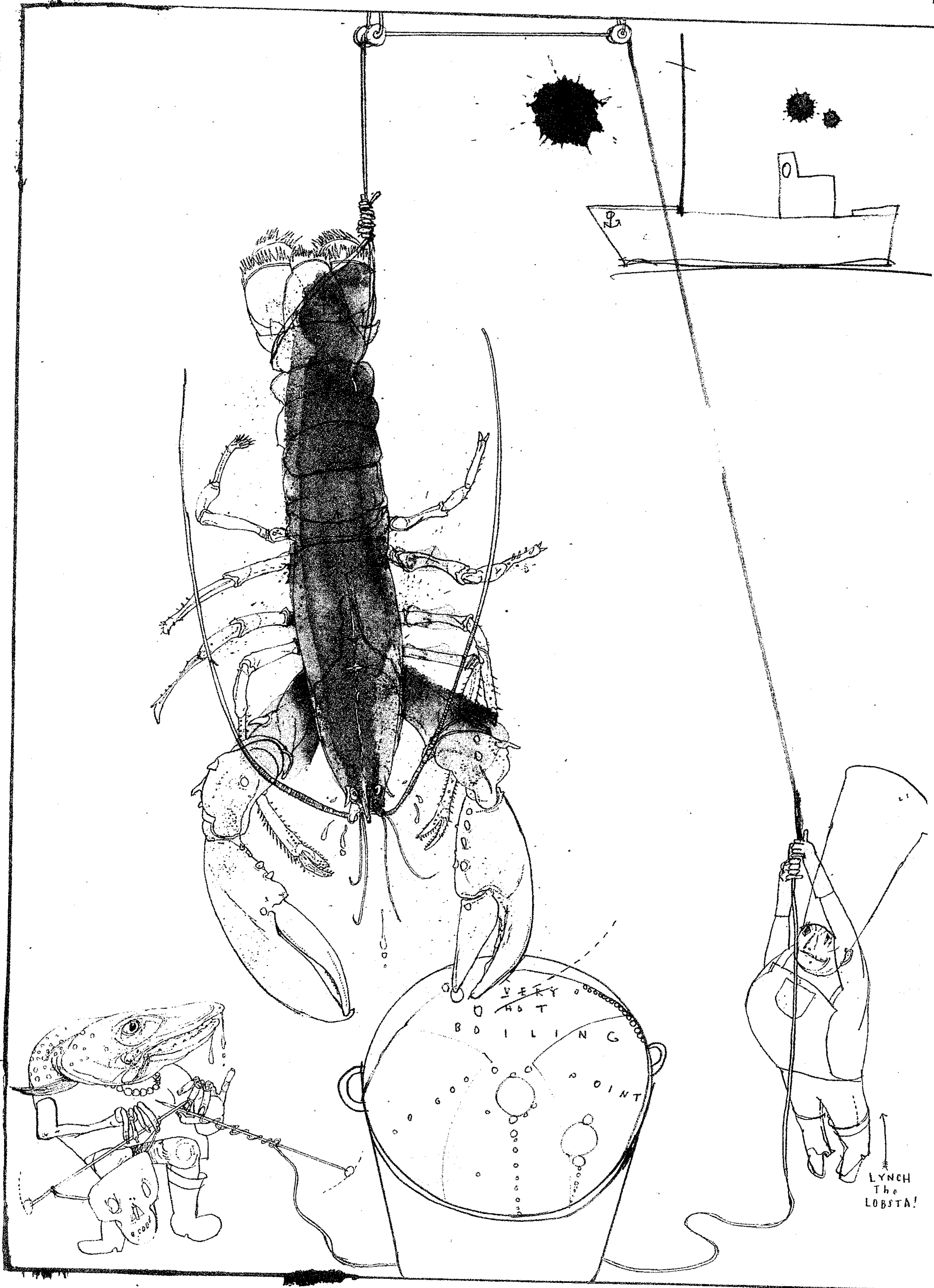
them this summer.

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. What do we lose if we lose lobster?

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN AN adventurous eater. I have eaten whale. I have eaten dog. I have sampled horse sashimi

and poisonous blowfish. I have nibbled on squid while it was still squirming. But in recent years I have become more thoughtful about my food. Now I avoid certain things—namely, chicken and beef from the average supermarket.

I belong to a new demographic called ethical eaters. We join the Slow Food movement and buy books like *Eating with Conscience*, *Portrait of a Burger as a Young Calf*, and—one of this year's most talked about books—Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. We want our food to have been happy in death.



LYNCH
The
LOBSTA!

Lobster is one of few foods that most Americans can still purchase alive and kicking. It is the last link between kitchens and the great outdoors. What do we lose if we lose lobster?

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.

Usually I purchase my live lobsters when I am visiting Maine, but sometimes I buy them from Whole Foods. In general, I like shopping at Whole Foods for the same reasons I like buying live lobster. The store sells eggs, poultry, and meat from animals that live a more natural life than those on factory farms. When I pass the lobster tank at Whole Foods, I smile.

Apparently, many Americans—maybe most—do not share my sentiments. Karin Robertson, manager of the Fish Empathy Project at People for the Ethical Treat-

ment of Animals (PETA), says she gets calls all the time from people who refuse to shop at Whole Foods because of the live lobster tanks. Robertson sees this as part of the global trend toward greater compassion for crustaceans. "We never would consider boiling a dog alive," she says.

At Whole Foods, the vice president for global communications and quality standards, Margaret Wittenberg, is well aware of all this. "For years," she tells me, "we've had a lot of customers questioning, 'why are you selling live lobsters?'" Last November, the company convened a special Lobster Task Force, and gave it seven months to decide what to do about those clawed monsters lurking in the company's stores.

WHOLE FOODS, WHICH NOW has 17 stores in the Boston area, is starting to pay a price for its phenomenal success. Ethical eaters want their food to come from local, small-scale, sustainable farmers.

But Whole Foods is a huge corporation that gets much of its produce from distant, industrial-sized organic farms. So it's ironic that live lobster is the one item Whole Foods sells that's consistently produced by an industry composed almost entirely of model fishermen using environmentally friendly methods. Unlike corn and cows and chickens, live lobsters have not been processed into unrecognizable food products by faceless corporations. Yet it was these live lobsters that the company was now threatening to remove, all for the sake of appeasing ethical eaters.

Why? According to PETA's Robertson, the entire process of capturing, storing, transporting, and cooking lobsters is "so graphic, so painful, and so cruel" that it cannot possibly be accomplished in a humane fashion—period.

Of course, you'd expect PETA to say that. 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. (If you want to see cruel, witness an episode of lobster combat in the wild. It begins with the firing of chemical weapons loaded into jets of urine, and can end with fractured shells, amputated limbs, and sometimes merciless cannibalism.)

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.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

FOR 30 YEARS, LOBSTERS HAVE BEEN TAKING THE HIT FOR HOLLYWOOD.



ANNIE HALL
(1977)



SPLASH
(1984)



THE NAKED GUN 2½
(1991)



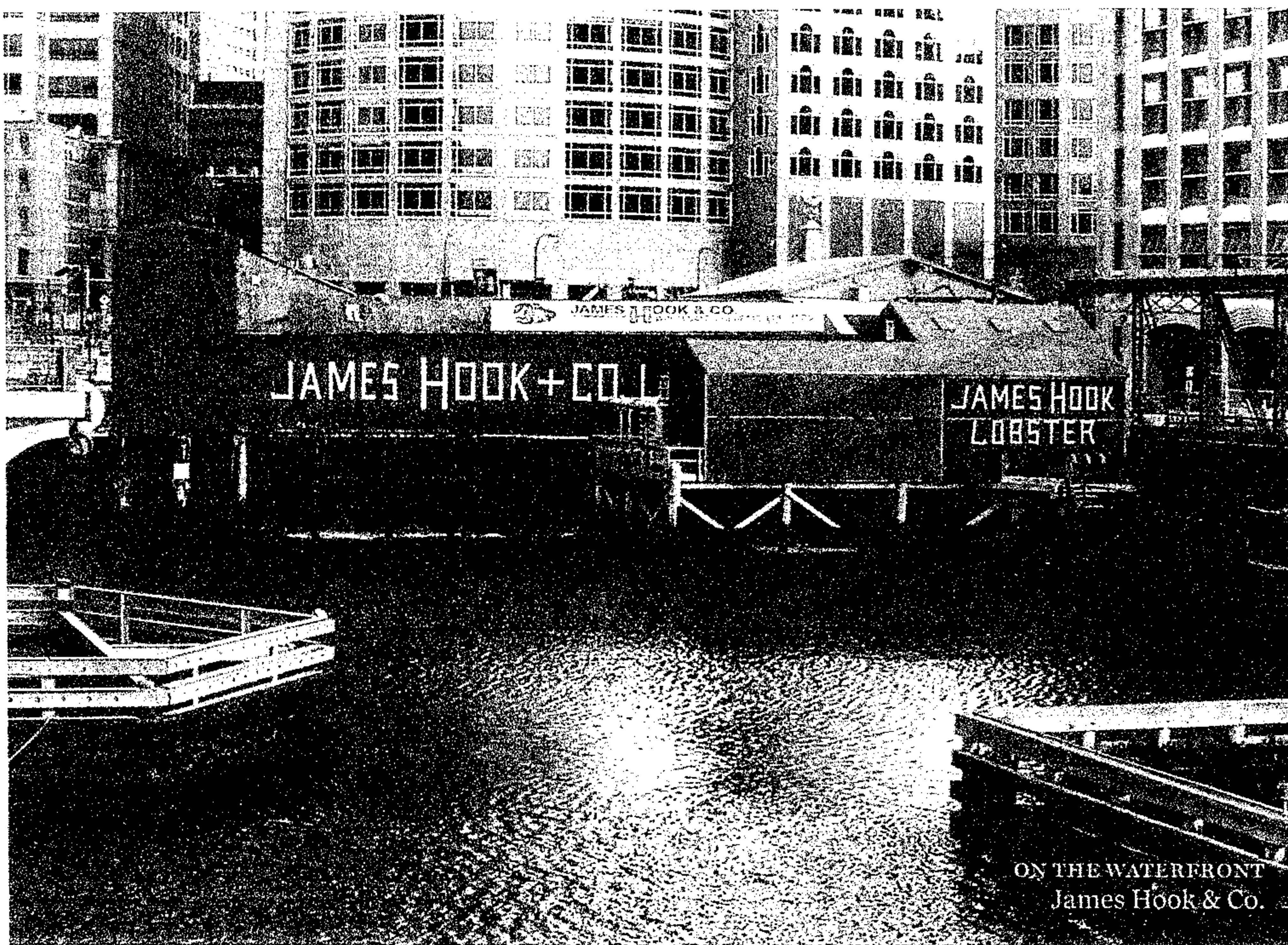
MRS. DOUBTFIRE
(1993)



FEVER PITCH
(2005)



BEWITCHED
(2005)



THE LOBSTER TRAP

Sell out for millions? No, thanks. The Hooks want to keep Boston a lobster town.

THEY SAY EVERY MAN HAS HIS PRICE. But *they* clearly never met the Hooks, who almost single-handedly have maintained Boston's reputation as a lobster town. Open since 1925, family-owned James Hook & Co. has sold lobsters to local gastro-luminaries such as Julia Child and served as the main source for wholesalers around the country: On any given day, it sells up to 20,000 pounds of lobster, a total of more than 4 million pounds annually. ¶ Gourmets love visiting Hook's rustic storefront to inhale a whiff of salty air or pick up one of the 10- to 25-pounders in the display tank. But in recent years, real estate developers have been sniffing around, too. The Hook property, at the corner of Atlantic and Northern avenues, is next door to ritzy Rows Wharf. Ever since the Big Dig began, Hook siblings Ed, James, Al, and Nancy have been receiving offers, some reportedly as high as \$40 million, to turn the plot into hotels, condos, or offices. Some proposals offered to relocate the Hooks; others suggested incorporating a small retail area for the business as a living historical plaque—and, no doubt, an alluring perk for new tenants. But the family has refused to budge. "We've defended our position on the waterfront," says Ed. "We're the third generation. We can afford to stay. And I'd like to give the kids an opportunity to work here." —Jane Black

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.

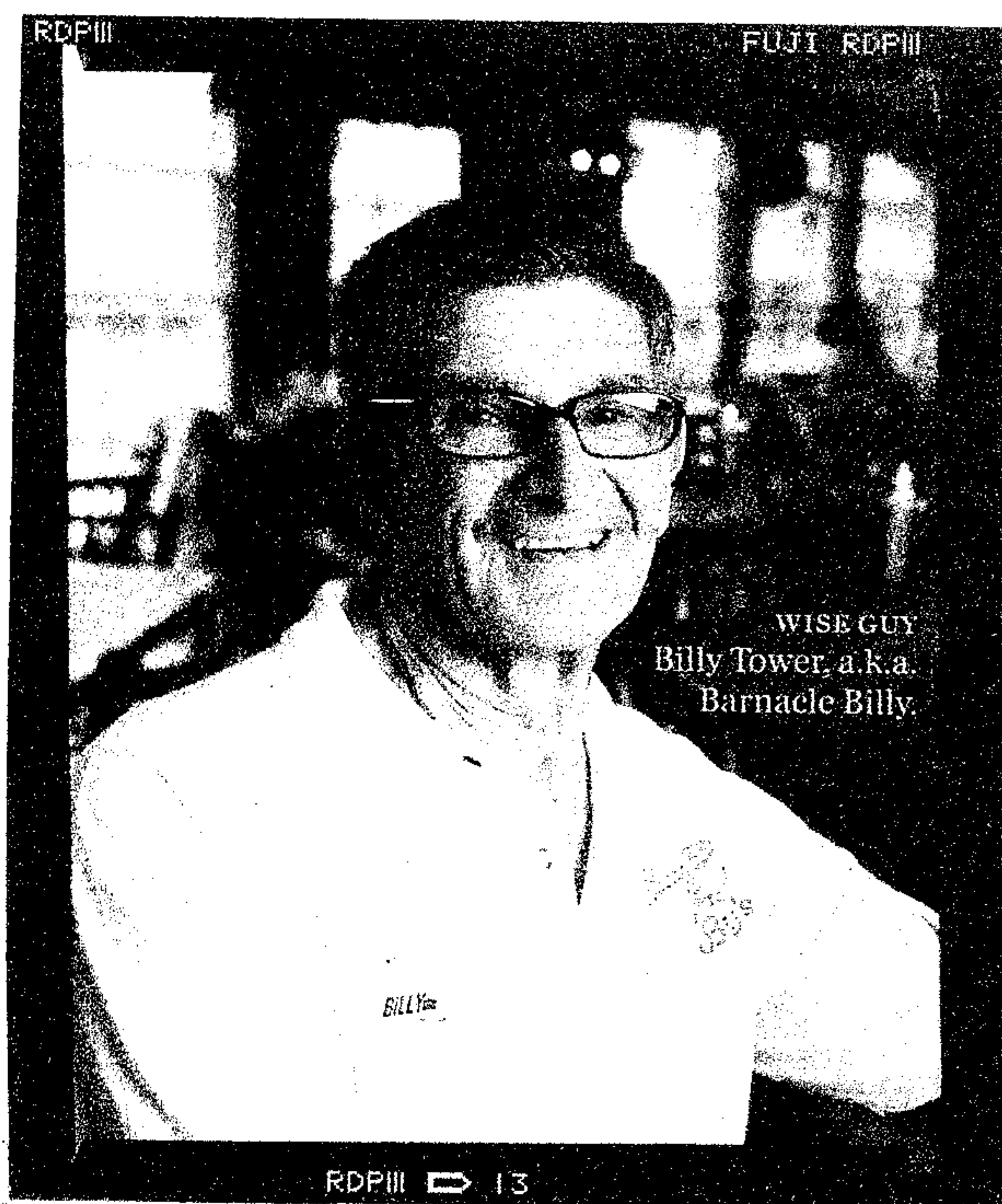
That leaves cooking. It's the thornier problem, and what most upsets people. There are reasons why lobsters have traditionally been boiled alive. First, they are hardy animals—unlike fish, they can survive out of water long enough to make it to the kitchen still kicking. Second, the flesh of lobsters is nearly impossible to extract prior to cooking. You can't fillet a dead lobster the way you can a dead fish, so why bother killing it before you cook it?

But if animal rights activ-

ists get their way, our traditional methods may disappear. In England, in response to the tightening of animal welfare laws, 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.

THE DELIBERATIONS OF Whole Foods' Lobster Task Force were wracked by uncertainty. In early May, a spokesperson from the company told me that the group would be making its final decision in a few days. One option that Wittenberg, the vice president for quality standards, was considering was for Whole Foods to buy all its lobsters from Clearwater—the folks with the lobster condos—in order to satisfy the new compassion standards. As an experiment, Whole Foods stores in New York City began installing condos of their own that allowed lobsters to hide in little pipes. Customers were fascinated; the company's seafood experts also noted the lobsters seemed happier. Whole Foods began installing similar condos in other locations, including all of its Boston-area stores.

Then, on May 9, the Lobster Task Force convened for its final meeting, at which new questions arose. According to a company spokesperson, Whole Foods was



RED ALERT!

You may not know as much about lobster as you think, warns Barnacle Billy.

BARNACLE BILLY'S IS AN OGUNQUIT INSTITUTION. And so is its owner Billy Tower, who's been catching, cooking, and feeding rich, famous, and dedicated lobster-lovers for 45 years. Test your own seaworthiness with Barnacle Billy's true-or-false crustacean quiz. —Blythe Copeland

It has to be from Maine. (False) "There's not much difference between Maine and Canadian lobster," says Tower. Maine has the brand, but during the busy season almost everyone imports from up north: In 2004, Canada trapped 53,060 tons of lobster versus Maine's 31,575.

Summer lobsters rock. (False) According to Tower, a lobster sheds its shell in warmer July water and begins growing a new one that hardens later on. That means late-summer lobsters look bigger, but have up to 20 percent less meat than their spring cousins of comparable weight.

Lobsters are cannibals. (True) Lobsters typically eat crabs, clams, mussels, and the occasional dull-witted fish. In a fight or in captivity, however, they have been known to eat one another. This is why their claws are banded before sale.

Bigger (or smaller) is better. (False) Tower says lobster tastes the same, whatever the size. But extra-large lobsters—anything longer than five inches from the eyes to the end of the hard shell—are illegal in Maine. Gluttons: Stay in Massachusetts or head to New Hampshire, both of which have looser restrictions.

Lobsters can be hypnotized. (True) Stand the lobster on its head with its claws in front and its tail curled inward. Rub your hand down its back shell, and massage between the eyes. There is no evidence, however, that this will make boiling less painful.

You New Englanders eat a lot of lobster. (Maybe) But have you ever consumed 44 lobsters in 12 minutes? That's what Sonya Thomas, a.k.a. the Black Widow, did, setting a world record at the World Lobster Eating Festival in Kennebunkport in 2005.

considering removing live lobsters from its stores after all. (By the time you read this, the company should have announced its final decision to the public.)

My guess is that Whole Foods will decide that selling live lobster is a lost cause. In 2005, the Maine Lobster Promotional Council commissioned a survey on people's attitudes toward lobster. Only 15 percent of Americans, mostly in the Northeast, qualified as "traditionalists" who wanted their lobsters alive. An equally small number, just 13 percent, objected to the retail sale of live lobsters for reasons of cruelty. For Whole Foods, the smart business decision is to target the silent majority—the 50 percent or so of Americans who would love to buy fresh lobster if only it were easier to prepare.

Maine entrepreneur John Hathaway is one of several people testing out a new technology that could function as a compromise. Hathaway used to sell traditional, steamed whole lobsters at his restaurant in Kennebunkport. A few years ago, he added lobster caesar salad to the menu and noticed far more tourists ordering that—it was less messy and more convenient. This spring, Hathaway opened a new business. Called Shucks Maine Lobster, it essentially consists of an 80,000-pound, 16-foot-tall machine that uses technology adapted from U.S. Army research, and is much scarier than a CrustaStun. 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 almost instantly 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.

IN SOME WAYS, I WELCOME THE end of boiling lobsters alive. I am with that Italian town—it is useless torture. 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 a big corporation and its automated executioners. As much as I adore Whole Foods, the company trades on an ethical fiction: that we can be close to our food and far away from it at the same time.

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, also gets a humane stamp of approval. **B**

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).