

15 MINUTES

How about a lobster for breakfast?

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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Sunday morning began in the balmy darkness, traveling west from Alva on Palm Beach Boulevard. Besides the passing glow of gas stations, a message for the hungry appeared near Fort Myers' power plant: a neon lobster. The lit lobster is the golden arches, so to speak, of Maine's Best Seafood Restaurant and Fish Market.

The name is odd and incongruent on the Southwest Florida landscape, where it appears on a sign above a faded, powder-blue building; but the place, which has crates of rambunctious Maine lobsters delivered three times per week, has served lunch and dinner since 1991. Just last week it opened for breakfast. Its edible mascots, maybe, are the lobsters kept in a 10,000 gallon tank in a huge, cold room in back.

To add perspective, one of the lobsters in Maine's Best's tank is estimated to be 100 years old. The question remains: is it now available for breakfast, scrambled with eggs?

"Yes," said owner Gary F. Buell. "Those are delicious. One thing about lobster - the shell gets harder (with age), but the meat inside doesn't change."

In any case, I spared the lobster by choosing the BLT, a fresh, classic rendition on whole wheat, and home fries (there are many other traditional choices) - but maybe I'll come back for the old monster later, with friends; it weighs 20 pounds.

The lobsters are flown in fresh, and usually out of the water only 12 hours, Buell said. Some of the catch is served to hungry customers looking for a "Down East" treat.

"I like 'em right from the tank into the steamer," he said.

Other times he keeps them in the tanks for 24 hours to help them regain their strength, before they get shipped out to Albertsons, Wal-Mart and other Southwest Florida stores and restaurants as far as Marco Island and Sarasota.

It would cost about \$300 to purchase the 100-year-old, 20-pound lobster for dinner, he said, at \$14.95 per pound. But by June the price will drop to \$11.95, since Maine lobster season starts in May.

Buell, 45, and his wife Mia have owned the restaurant for three years. They arrived about 5 a.m. last Sunday to begin setting up for breakfast; cooking bacon and sausage. When Buell was in his 20's he bounced around Fort Lauderdale and Naples restaurants. That was before having two children, Brent and Laura (now in high school), buying a house in Alva, and purchasing Maine's Best.

His favorite part about the job is running the front of the house.

"You meet so many cool people from all over the country," he said.

And his favorite part of the country is home. "I love it here," he said. "I'm a cracker at heart, man."

"I live right on the river. I mean, it's incredible. I've got 110-year-old oaks that surround my house, big old oak trees from when Edison was traveling through this area."

He has worked in fine dining and southern home cooking, as general manager and as a cook, and went to hospitality school in Mas-



A one pound lobster



Looking for lunch!



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTOS EVAN WILLIAMS

Gary Buell with 100-year-old, 20-pound Maine lobster.

sachusetts. One of his first jobs was at an Italian restaurant in his hometown, Southbridge, Mass., called Rob's. He worked there after school and between playing football, hockey and baseball.

"They had a little takeout window for clams," he remembered.

But caring for these crustaceans has been an entirely new deal.

"A lot of people can run a restaurant, but they wouldn't know how to handle the lobsters," he said.

The three holding tanks in back, for example, can hold 20,000 pounds of lobster (worth

about \$300,000); the water runs through frozen pipes to get to the icy 41 degrees needed to keep the crustaceans alive. The electric bill, Buell said, is \$6,000 per month.

Beverly Tully, a waitress who has been there a little over a year, pushed two tables together for a large group of sleepy diners in need of coffee. She said she really likes lobster but it might be hard to see the 100-year-old "bug" on someone's dinner plate.

"It might be kind of sad," she said. "But it's that way with everything, hon. If I could see the cow I probably wouldn't want to eat it, either." ■

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