



Contributed photos

The perfect setting on the gravel driveway of Birbarie Marine is Branford's Lobster Shack, keeping it simple with lobster rolls, hot dogs and grilled clams, plus sausage and peppers and gelato to finish off the summery fare.

# The Lobster Shack

Celebrating the simple joys of summer in Branford  
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**L**OBSTER, ROLL, BUTTER, LEMON.

It's simple. It's summer. It's the quintessence of summer.

If there's anything that sings summer on the Shoreline, it's the lobster roll. And, as anyone who has ever savored a lobster roll will attest, an essential element is setting. In short, place as well as taste matters.

Consider, then, The Lobster Shack of Branford. Consider the cheerful maroon-colored trailer, the unusually comfortable picnic tables shaded by umbrellas overlooking the marina, the boats gently plying the Branford River, the gulls wheeling overhead, the live music on Sunday afternoons.

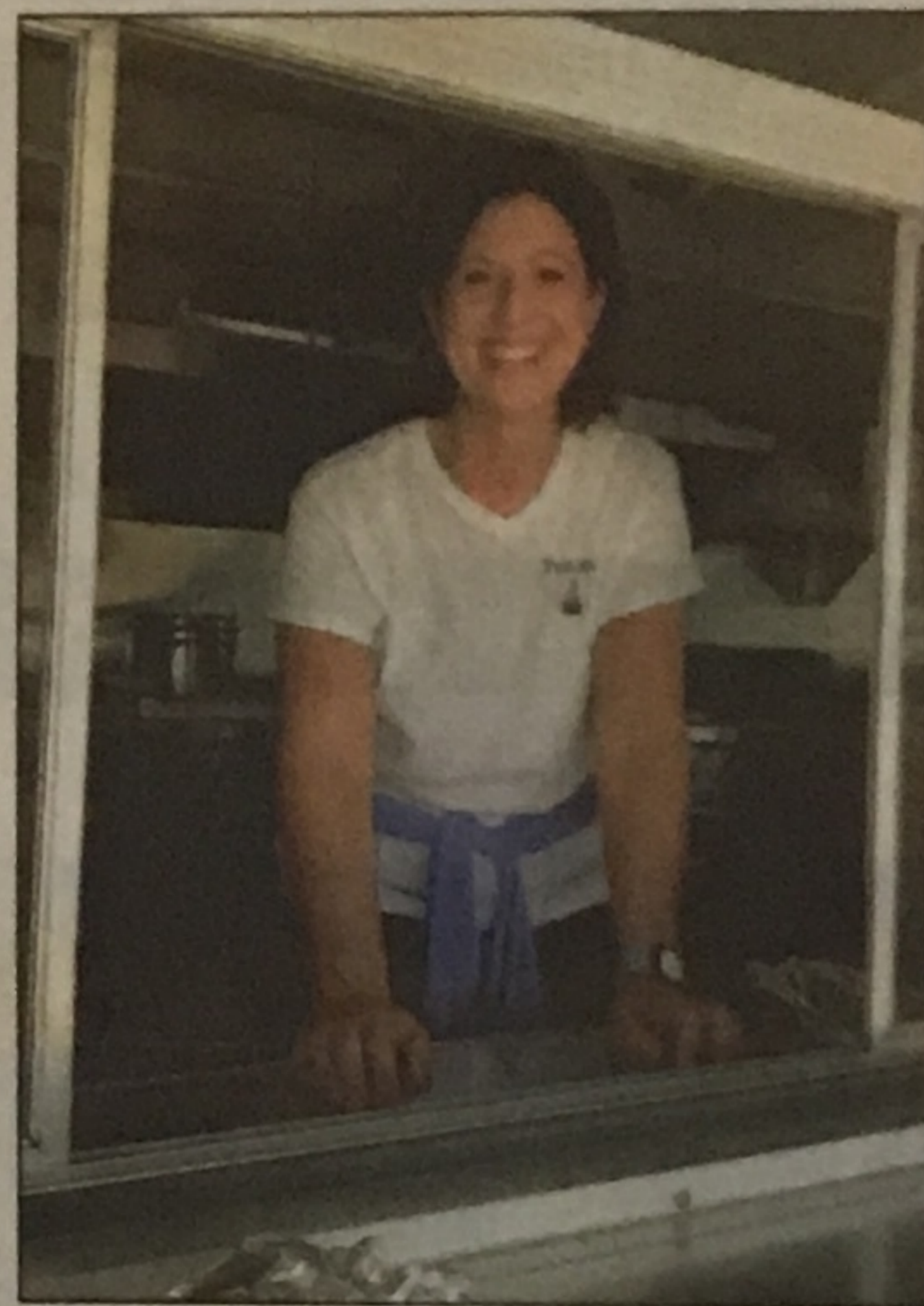
Then there's the lobster, that big and juicy jewel of the sea, the sweetest of New England's delights. And the roll: not a dinky hot dog bun, but a grinder roll, ordered from Vermont by Lobster Shack owner Arlene Crismale, flawlessly toasted, able to withstand generous chunks — a quarter pound, no less — of freshly picked tail and claw meat



drizzled with real butter and tanged with fresh lemon.

Before Crismale had perfected her award-winning lobster roll; before she had squarely established the big maroon trailer at the end of the gravel driveway of Birbarie Marina as an essential summer dining destination for locals and tourists alike, there was only an empty spot located near the Maple Avenue dock where Crismale's husband Nick kept his lobster and clam boats.

And that's really where the story of The Lobster Shack begins, with the catastrophic die-off of lobsters in 1999 that devastated the livelihood of lobstermen, including Nick Crismale's Branford River Lobster, a wholesale and retail lobster pound at which Arlene occasionally helped



Arlene Crismale set up a lobster shack near her husband Nick's lobster pound, then moved it to Birbarie Marina.

out.

It was a white trailer that in part coaxed Arlene Crismale in the direction of setting up a stand near her husband's dock selling lobster rolls and hot dogs in 2007. Ten years before Nick had bought the trailer in the hope that his wife would run a lobster stand near his pound. She had balked. "I could never envision myself running a lobster shack back then," Crismale said, her face breaking into a smile.

And then, after watching the trailer sit idle for years, she gave it another long look. Having retired from the phone company and then working at a gallery in Orange, she felt the impulse to "do something different, take a risk." There was also the encouragement of a friend in the lobster business willing to show her some tricks of the trade. And the fact that she'd been around boats and the fishing business for years.

Not least were the words of a woman who stopped by early on to welcome her to the Indian Neck neighborhood, grab a cold soda from the cooler on the side of the white trailer, and offer a few words of advice.

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# The Lobster Shack : Summer flavor on a roll

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“Keep it simple,” said Jane Rosenthal, the beloved owner and manager of The Owenego Beach and Tennis Club and lifelong resident of Branford who died last November. “Keep it simple and you’ll be successful.”

At the time, “I didn’t really know what I was doing,” the perennially upbeat 62-year-old said on a recent afternoon as her staff assembled hot shrimp rolls, grilled Hummel’s hot dogs and clams, and ladled chowder like a well-oiled machine. “What looked

easy wasn’t easy. I was literally learning on the job.”

Gradually, something remarkable happened. “It started to catch on,” said Crismale, shaking her head, still seemingly incredulous at what she had created. “People started coming and they kept coming and they told their friends.” And they never stopped, even when, two years later, the big maroon trailer replaced the smaller white one and the business expanded to its current quarters in the Birbarie Marina on Indian Neck Avenue.

What’s more remark-

able is that, amid stiff local competition, Crismale has distinguished her business in six short years — millisecond in the ordinary life span of lobster shacks — winning critical praise from the New Haven Register and the New Haven Advocate and a prominent chapter in Mike Urban’s 2012 “Lobster Shacks: A Road Guide to New England’s Best Lobster Joints.”

All along, in the face of pressure to extend her hours and to include fried food on the menu — “no frying in here,” said Crismale, noting it reaches 110 degrees in

the trailer on hot days — she’s kept the words of Jane Rosenthal in mind.

“The best thing is when people say they love it for its simplicity,” she said, “when they tell me not to change a thing, not the grilled clams, not the chowder, not the sausage and pepper sandwiches.”

And, above all, not the lobster roll. Lobster, roll, butter, lemon. Simple. Summer.

The Lobster Shack, 7 Indian Neck Ave. Branford. 203-483-8414. [www.lobstershackct.com](http://www.lobstershackct.com). Open from mid-May to mid-October.