

Crab Shell/Shack

by Laura Kenyon

Driving to Stamford's Crab Shell restaurant on a Thursday night, which would kick off a weekend of relentless thunderstorms, I was sure when I got there the outside tables would be abandoned and the hostess would look at me like I was either clinically insane or eager to be struck by lightning.

But as I turned off Southfield Avenue into the large parking lot, my worries melted like a piña colada in the sun.

Tucked beside the Stamford Landing marina amidst a sea of blue- and white- striped canopies, the place was hopping. The scene

could have been printed on a T-shirt, directly under the Shell's motto, "No bad days."

I had been waiting since April for the year-round seafood restaurant to open its outdoor area, particularly the dockside spot known as the Crab Shack, where patrons can sit, stand, eat, drink, mingle, listen to



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music and watch boaters launch their treasures from the marina.

While waiting for my friend to arrive, I surveyed the crowd and grew increasingly anxious to join the party. Scattered along the boardwalk and clustered around the Shack were all kinds of people: young parents with children in tow; middle-aged couples dressed for Aruba; groups of women ready to paint the town red; 20-somethings in T-shirts coveting pitchers of Bud Light; and young professionals with loosened ties, beers in hand and everything's-right-with-the-world auras.

Slightly softer than the overlapping conversations, and occasionally drowned out by shrieks of laughter, Bob Marley's reggae sounds pushed through the heavy air. No one seemed to hear the thunder, notice the breeze whipping through the transplanted beach grass or care about the gray, flashing sky that was creeping ominously closer.

When I saw a young man look from his nervous female companion to the clouds, throw

his arms up and shout (softly), "Jesus, take me!"... I knew "No bad days" was more than just a patron pick-up line.

This laid-back attitude isn't surprising considering the creation of the Crab Shack is itself a story of staring bad luck in the face and saying, "We can work with this."

According to president Dick Gildersleeve, on a vernal equinox sometime in the early 90s, a stolen rental car ploughed through the outdoor area of the Crab Shell, which he had built with vice president Jim Clifford in 1989. The driver then set the vehicle on fire.

"It wrecked everything," Dick said.

But rather than pick up the pieces with heavy hearts and pre-disaster blueprints, the duo saw an opportunity to create what they had always wanted — a big, casual, summer bar area distinct from but part of the Crab Shell.

The idea was inspired by Newport Beach, but tailored to New England tastes. It was

also something the loosening liquor laws finally permitted.

In a matter of weeks, the Crab Shack was built and ready to ring in the summer. The owners started booking local bands, and, in Dick's words, "it just blossomed."

Technically, the Crab Shack is the little wood-shingled pavilion and bar surrounded by clusters of tables alongside the water. Bands, mostly playing covers, "rock the boat" there Thursdays through Sundays.

Unlike the Shell, it is open only from mid-May to mid-September, weather permitting. A few feet further back, two rows of tables loop the restaurant for those who want to soak up the rays but think the region of the Shack a bit too rowdy. Anyone who wants to avoid Mother Nature entirely may sit inside.

When the other half of my party arrived, we picked a spot close to the restaurant so we could order from a more extensive menu. During lunch hours there is one menu for both the Shell and the Shack, but for dinner, the Shack has a shorter menu specializing in casual food such as burgers, quesadillas, clam strips and buffalo wings (\$8-12), and lobster rolls (market price).

A waiter immediately came over to lower a clear plastic curtain where the wind would most likely blow rain at us, and we each ordered a beer (tip for Irish beer connoisseurs: they have Smithwick's on tap). When the downpour began, many Shackers reluctantly started making their way towards the building and the indoor bar. Some troupers remained, but the band that was scheduled to play was canceled.

Turning our attention to our growling stomachs, we decided to start off with New England clam chowder (\$6) and the chilled seafood -combo appetizer (\$23) because it

offered a good sampling of what the Crab Shack is famous for. Both are also on the Shack's dinner menu.

The combo came with three oysters, three clams, three jumbo shrimp and half of a lobster. The shrimp were delicious, the lobster was very good but fairly small, and although I am not a fan of raw mollusks, I will say that the oysters and clams were very fresh.

The chowder, filled with clams and vegetables, was amazing. One of the best recipes I've ever had, it was not watery, overly creamy or 90% potatoes. The menu also offers crab chowder and Manhattan-style clam chowder.

When our entrees arrived, my eyes popped at the size of the plates. My shrimp, scallops and lobster stir-fry (\$22) overflowed with broccoli, yellow squash, green zucchini and a generous amount of seafood in a sweet pineapple teriyaki sauce. It was light and fantastic.

My friend's chicken penne (\$19) was covered in a basil-cream pesto sauce, which was very filling but also very tasty. The meat was excellent, he said, and reminded him of eating grilled chicken at a summer barbecue.

Despite my happily protruding tummy, I was somehow convinced after dinner to split a slice of pecan pie, something I'd never tried before. The Shell's recipe was so good I am plotting throwing a party just so I can make some pecan pie of my own. It was warm, bursting with pecans over a caramel-like layer, and served with vanilla ice cream.

As we prepared to leave around 10, only a handful of people remained outside, although the Crab Shell prides itself on staying open as late as its customers demand, within reason.

"We're open when we're supposed to be open," Dick told me earlier. Unless the kitchen is entirely shut down, "if there're people coming in here at 10:30 and want to eat, they get fed."

I believe him, because on a clearer evening I would have been one of those people pushing on into the wee hours of the night, basking in the moonlight and swaying to the summertime music on the dock.

Although I left that night using my doggy bag to shield my head from the rain, I have no doubt that I will be spending many, many weekends this summer relaxing on the docks beside the Crab Shell. There aren't too many public places where you can bask in the sun with a beer and a burger or listen to live music with wine and a nice meal, five feet from the Long Island Sound.

I hope next time the only water I see will be rippling alongside from a fleet of yachts.

WRAPPING IT UP

LOCATION: 46 Southfield Avenue, Stamford.

HOURS: Open daily from 11:30 a.m. to close. Evening bands are scheduled, weather permitting, mid-May through mid-September, Thursdays 7 to 11:30 ; Fridays 8 to 12:30 ; Saturdays 7:30 to 12; and Sundays 6:30 to 11.

RESERVATIONS: Not accepted for the Crab Shack; at the Crab Shell, before 6 for a party of six or more.

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WEB SITE: www.crabshell.com.

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