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# Michael (and Bob)

*The more things change, the more they stay the same. It's a cliché, but if you're a customer at Bob's Clam Hut in Kittery, owner Michael Landgarten knows it might just be the reason you came*

by Kathryn Williams ★ photography by Lily Piel

< Clockwise from far left: Shari Manson, Jeff Turner, Zach Steinhauer, Michael Landgarten and Marni Russell

## The Numbers Each Year

3,256 gallons of clams are served · 11,416 pounds of French fries are eaten · 47,175 lobster rolls are sold  
1,717 gallons of clam chowder are ordered · 110,000–120,000 pounds of food are composted

When Michael Landgarten bought Bob's Clam Hut in 1986, Route 1 through Kittery was a two-lane highway and local clambers still worked the flats of Spruce Creek next door. The seafood shack operated from a 15-by-20-foot building and customers ate at picnic tables or, in colder months, in their cars.

Bob's was born 30 years earlier, when Kittery native Bob Kraft asked his mother if he could co-opt a corner of her backyard for a roadside clam shack. Kraft was a student of such establishments. Only this wouldn't be a shack. It would be a hut. "There was a very direct line from God to Bob [about the name]," Landgarten jokes.

At a time when Kittery was a village, and this stretch of road was its center, regulars knew they could pull into the Clam Hut's gravel lot and Kraft's wife, Betty, would have a fresh basket of hot, whole-belly fried clams ready before the car's hood cooled. Bob's became a local institution, the Cheers of clams.

Now, of course, Kittery is a bustling strip of outlet malls and chain restaurants. Across from Bob's sits a Starbucks and a Yankee Candle Co. store. In the summer months, buses unload hordes of tourists. At high season, the Clam Hut's staff swells to 30, with 17 working the line. "The place is teeming," Landgarten says, likening the atmosphere to New York's Fifth Avenue at Christmas.

As a student at Bowdoin, Landgarten, who grew up in Worcester, Massachusetts, kept a chalkboard with a list of fish shacks waiting to be tried. Later, living in Boston as a musician turned "unemployable" computer programmer, he found himself searching for a seasonal business to purchase. His father's friend pointed him north to Bob's Clam Hut.

Landgarten asked if he could work a day in the kitchen. "I went home and smelled like fish, covered in flour. I knew at some deep level—heart, soul, true nature speaking, whatever—that this was my path."

It was about the people. "They are so genuine; they work so hard." It was also about Bob. As much a coach as a boss, Kraft, who passed away in 2003, was a natural leader who praised in public and reprimanded in private. If an employee wasn't working out, he took them out back to talk it through. "He had a different way of treating people, treating *me*. Now I can see what it might have been like to sell your business to a 26-year-old kid."

But sell Kraft did, staying on that summer to help with the transition. Today, Bob's Clam Hut serves 3,256 gallons of

clams a year. It has won a bevy of accolades, including a visit from Guy Fieri on "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives." And almost all of Kraft's children and grandchildren have worked there at one time or another.

Kittery has changed, but what is essential about Bob's has not. Landgarten points out the original take-out windows. The addition he added in 1991, for an inside dining area, has the same footprint as Kraft's mother's old house. They've grown from three to 11 fryers and no longer use a meat grinder to make the tartar sauce, but the recipe remains the same, with carrots and onion and dill relish instead of sweet.

Also unchanged is the recipe for Bob's clams, starting with "crazy fresh" clams from small vendors in Maine, Ipswich, Massachusetts, and Maryland. From there, it's simple. No seasoning. A flour dredge, and a run through super clean, hot oil. (Landgarten *has* abandoned the lard.) The result is lightly crisp, succulent clams with a subtle sweetness and ocean brine.

There is a second fried clam recipe at Bob's, and that belongs to Lillian, a longtime and beloved employee who appeared at the kitchen door in 1986, age 62, refusing to fill out an application but promising she was worth the hire. You came to her window "because she was gruff." After years of resisting, Landgarten gave her recipe a shot—and a 15-cent royalty for every order sold. Dipped in egg for a breadier, slightly sour-dough coating, "Lillian's Clams" still grace the menu.

Of course, not all remains the same. The restaurant's green initiatives are a sign of the times. It composts more than 300 pounds of food a day and has switched from paper to reusable plastic plates and baskets. The menu features responsibly harvested and "underloved" fish options and solar panels adorn the roof. Most notably, there are two new establishments in the Bob's family: the farm-to-table Robert's Maine Grill across Route 1, and Lil's Café on the Kittery Foreside, serving coffee, sandwiches and formidable French crullers.

However, even change at Bob's is about maintaining continuity. It's "like home for people," Landgarten says. "It's real for folks. It's not tired; it's still well loved and cared for."

He goes back to Sept. 11, 2001. After the planes hit the towers in New York, Landgarten came to the restaurant, not sure where else to go. "The tables were full. "This was the place where people came." For Bob's, nostalgia is not about selling clams, it's about family, stability and, of course, fun. Surely, Bob would recognize that.