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Seafood spot face-off

We compare two seafood spots channeling the East Coast

January 19, 2012 | By Erin Brereton | For RedEye

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New England expats may not be able to find much maple sugar candy in Chicago, but thanks to two fish markets with eateries tucked inside, they can get their fresh fish fix.

On Monday, Waltham, Mass.-born distributor Bill Dugan turned part of popular Albany Park store Fishguy Market (4423 N. Elston Ave. 773-283-7400) into Wellfleet, a cafe serving lobster rolls and other seafarin' snacks. Meanwhile, in Lakeview, the New England Seafood Company Fish Market (3341 N. Lincoln Ave. 773-871-3474), owned by a trio of Boston-area brothers, has been whipping up fried shrimp and lobster bisque since the fall.

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Both are a nice catch when it comes to fresh fish. But which of these market/restaurant combos offers the most authentic New England fare?

THE BACKGROUND

Wellfleet: Wholesale fish supplier Bill Dugan counts some of the city's top chefs as clients, including Grant Achatz and Charlie Trotter, Dugan's first Chicago customer more than two decades ago. For the past six years, he's offered a reservations-only Friday night supper club at his seafood store, and he's made in-market dining a permanent fixture with Wellfleet. It's currently open for lunch, with private parties at night and dinner service to be added at a later date.

New England Seafood Company: Jeff Mazza and his brother Robert moved to Chicago to open a local outpost of their family-run, New England-based seafood distribution business. (The third brother, Mark, works on the East Coast.) They'd originally planned to offer only wholesale fish and a small market with some light fare "[But] we found nice space that was bigger, so we put more tables in," Jeff Mazza says. Shoppers can choose from the selection of seafood flown in daily from the East Coast, much of which is also available on the eatery's menu.

Advantage: With East Coast roots and more than 20 years working in the local scene, Dugan's Wellfleet has the upper hand.

SEA-LEVEL SCENE

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Wellfleet: Dugan says Wellfleet has “a Brooklyn fish market in the ‘40s or ‘50s” vibe, featuring white tile floors and taxidermied fish on the walls. Diners can sit at beachwood tables or the stainless steel counter. “We wanted to offer enough seating for people to eat without feeling crowded by the retail customers,” he says.

New England Seafood Company: The shop is decorated with lobster traps, buoys, retro ship photos and fishing nets from the boats that provide the eatery’s seafood. For-sale fish options are also on view in a display case. “The idea was a lobster-shack-slash-fish-market,” Mazza says.

Advantage: Both spots offer a refuge from their retail area and neither goes overboard with the fish theme. It’s a tie.

SEAFOOD SELECTION

Wellfleet: Some of Wellfleet’s dishes are made with seafood shipped in from the East Coast, such as live Nasketucket Bay scallops (\$14), a rare find in these parts, steamed to order in an herb and shallot broth. Other seafood comes from places such as Nova Scotia, which Dugan says is his best year-round source for the lobster used in his lobster roll (\$20).

New England Seafood Company: Patrons can pick up wild Maine mussels (\$2.75 a pound), oysters (\$1.49 each) or other fishy fare to make at home; however, New England transplants may be most excited about the steamers. These steamed clams (hard to find in the Midwest), come with the traditional fixings: a cup of broth to rinse away lingering sand and a cup of melted butter for dipping (\$8 per pound, plus \$1 to steam and dine in).

Advantage: Those live scallops are impressive, but with an entirely East Coast-imported inventory, the New England Seafood Company takes the (crab) cake.

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NAUTICAL NOSH

Wellfleet: This week’s opening menu included a pizza topped with house-cured salmon (\$16) and clam chowder (\$5 per cup, \$8 per bowl). Dugan says he and chef Cody Butler, who’s logged time at Boiler Room in Logan Square and restaurants in Philadelphia and New York, have come up with hundreds of options for future weeks. “[Periodically], we’ll pick a handful of items and say, ‘These are fresh, let’s do this with it,’” Dugan says.

New England Seafood Company: Meals are served in red plastic baskets lined with parchment paper or red-and-white-checked paper boxes. The lobster roll (\$16.95), made with bread shipped from Boston, is a top seller. See a lobster you like? You can select one for a lobster boil dinner, paired with corn on the cob, chowder, potatoes, butter and a bib (\$22.95-\$32.95 with a 1- to 1.5 pound lobster). The eatery also offers haddock, served fried or baked with a crumbled Ritz cracker topping (\$17.95), inspired by Mama Mazza’s recipe.

Advantage: New England Seafood Company, for its menu’s focus on East Coast classics.

OVERALL WINNER: Wellfleet is a stellar choice for some East Coast favorites and high-quality fish dishes. But when it comes to old-school, authentic New England fare, you had us at fried haddock, New England Seafood Company. Chowder, lobster dinners—and steamers! We never thought we’d be able to amass a tiny graveyard of clamshells at any restaurant this side of Pennsylvania. Truly, that’s one wicked awesome array of New England eats.

Erin Brereton is a RedEye special contributor. She was born in New Hampshire and keeps a secret stash of maple sugar candy in her desk.

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