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# Oyster Empire

With **Spat**, Rebecca Charles returns to Kennebunk after nearly 20 years spent showing New Yorkers what a real Maine lobster roll is all about.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Rebecca Charles, chef/owner of the wildly successful Pearl Oyster Bar in Manhattan since 1997, stands in a sweatshirt and sneakers in the middle of a vast, empty, cathedral-ceilinged room on Western Avenue in Kennebunk. The floors are wide planks, covered in dusty footprints. Overhead, garish, wacky chandeliers hang forlornly. The walls, all of them, and the ceiling, are painted a grim chalkboard black.

"Isn't it awful?" she asks. Her smile is huge. "You can see we've got a lot of work to do." In three days, the renovation team will descend to transform the cavernous room into a bustling seasonal restaurant and, downstairs, into the pubby Spat Oyster Cellar. "Spat is a 'baby' oyster," she explains.

This restaurant, which has upstairs/downstairs dining areas, was most recently a



short-lived enterprise called Table intended for "cooking classes, pop-up dinners, mixology classes, [and] wine tastings," according to its promotional literature. When Table folded, Charles pounced and bought the building and the little "bakehouse" cottage

on the same property. Before Table, 27 Western Avenue housed the restaurant Abbondante, and before that Grissini (pictured next page), an Italian restaurant remembered affectionately by all of us who ever dined there.

"Grissini was a great place to have dinner—it was fun to be there," says Charles. She wants to bring back that feeling. Ironically, although the premises are now gutted, two of Grissini's most memorable features remain: The big stone fireplace in the dining room and an impossibly long, lovely pine harvest table that Grissini used for bounteous baskets of bouquets, bread, and cutting boards. When you came for dinner, the flickering fire and display of peasant breads seductively whispered *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

"Spat Oyster Cellar's menu will be very





**L**unch hour at Pearl Oyster Bar in New York's Greenwich Village is jumping on a weekday. A tiny storefront on Cornelia Street, Pearl has plate-glass windows overlooking the lovely block of gracious town houses. Mario Batali's very first restaurant, Po, is across the street. Batali has called Pearl his "favorite lunch spot on the planet." Ruth Reichl and writer Calvin Trillin, who is also a neighbor, are regulars. Trillin wrote the foreword for *Lobster Rolls & Blueberry Pie* (with Deborah DiClementi), published by Harper Collins in 2003; it's scheduled to be reissued by William Morrow next year.

Pearl's bar takes up the first room; tables for two and four fill a tiny adjacent dining room, which is cozy with brick walls, sage colored wainscoting, and framed prints of shellfish on the walls.

Jacob, the enchanting host, delivers us to a perfect deuce with a view. We're surrounded by a pilsner-sipping mob of conviviality, and, within a few minutes, served cold French rose and Blue Point oysters from Long Island. They're quite unlike mild Damariscottas, but they're exceptionally meaty and tasty with the delicate shallot mignonette.

Oysters are followed by a six-inch cornmeal johnnycake topped with a tangle of lightly smoked salmon and garnished with a dab of crème fraîche and snipped chives—utter heaven. The recipe is in *Lobster Rolls & Blueberry Pie*. Later, in Kennebunk, Rebecca tells us it's her "homage to my grandmother" (pictured above).

We conclude lunch with a pan-fried softshell crab that sits on a platter of sugar snap peas in lemon butter, scattered with toasted almond slivers. The crab is dabbed with what we decide is an exotic aioli, bright with minced red onion and capers.

Weeks later, Rebecca Charles laughs about this. "That's our house tartar sauce. We make it with Hellman's mayonnaise. Tartar sauce is not supposed to be aioli!"

The day we visited Pearl Oyster Bar, the market price of the Maine lobster roll—a gorgeous bounty of lobster meat heaped into a toasted bun with skinny fries on the side—is \$30. Thirty bucks!

"Hey, our Maine lobster travels a lot farther than yours do," says Charles. "And we cook them and break them down right here—we don't just buy the picked meat." Which is why they're so good, and why almost every table has at least one lobster roll on it.



similar to Pearl Oyster Bar," says Rebecca (pictured right). She plans to open it this month. The larger restaurant upstairs, tentatively named Pearl North, will offer non-seafood items as well and opens this fall (bottom right).

"I have a brasserie template" in mind for the big restaurant. "I actually don't like to work with interior designers too much, because that's the fun part. I'm going with classic French bistro Thonet bentwood chairs, but padded. And my menu—you'll see French elements, but it's American food."

Downstairs in the low-ceilinged snug that will become Spat Oyster Cellar, visitors are drawn to the long carrara marble bar and the small fireplace even before the restoration has begun. It will seat "approximately 35 at the bar and on the floor" and will be open year-round. It feels like just the intimate spot to stop for oysters and ale in a snowstorm.

#### KENNEBUNK CONNECTION

Rebecca Charles's family began coming from Brooklyn to summer in Kennebunk nearly 100 years ago. It's the late Rebecca "Pearle" Stein Goldsmith (left inset), her namesake maternal grandmother who so loved life and Kennebunk summers, who seems to be Charles's muse and inspiration. In her 2003 memoir/cookbook, *Lobster Rolls & Blueberry Pie*, Charles writes, "Maine will always be home because of our memories...My grandparents [Pearle and Goldie Goldsmith] first drove their shiny Packard touring car through Kennebunk in very early August 1920. As their car motored around Beach Avenue...they would have seen some of the same beautiful old stone cottages, shingled saltboxes, and Victorians lining the road across from the water that I now pass."

**G**oldsmith family summer-vacation tradition meant lodging at the Forest Hill House and Cottages on Western Avenue. Since the 1880s, and well into the 1940s, Forest Hill House was known as the Jewish guest house and was the only hotel in the yankee Kennebunks that accepted Jews as guests.

Today, Forest Hill House is the White Barn Inn. In the early 1980s, Rebecca Charles was hired as a young cook by the White Barn's then-owner, Jack Nahill, to come run



the kitchen and make the food more exciting. "First I took all the microwaves down to the basement," says Charles. "I completely changed the menu. They had packets of Knorr dried sauces! Their idea of an elegant dish was canned artichoke hearts with Knorr hollandaise sauce!" Her stint as chef lasted just the one season. "Jack hired me to completely change the menu, and I did, so he fired me." She laughs, with a carefree shrug. Restaurants are a crazy business.

#### A PRO IN HER ELEMENT

Charles, a youthful and energetic 62, earned her chops in restaurant kitchens in Kennebunk in the early 1980s, including at the Whistling Oyster and Café 74, which she ran, and in New York in the late '80s and '90s at many spots including Anne Rozenzweig's Arcadia, and then at Cascabel. She opened Pearl Oyster Bar in Manhattan's Greenwich Village in the summer of 1997.

"It really was the first place in the city to serve lobster rolls and chowder" and other New England classic summer food. "The knock-offs didn't take long. Mary's Fish Camp [also in the Village] was first, and now they're everywhere." She ponders the nature of New York food trends. "The lobster roll, the porchetta sandwich, and David Chang's pork bun—everyone knows these



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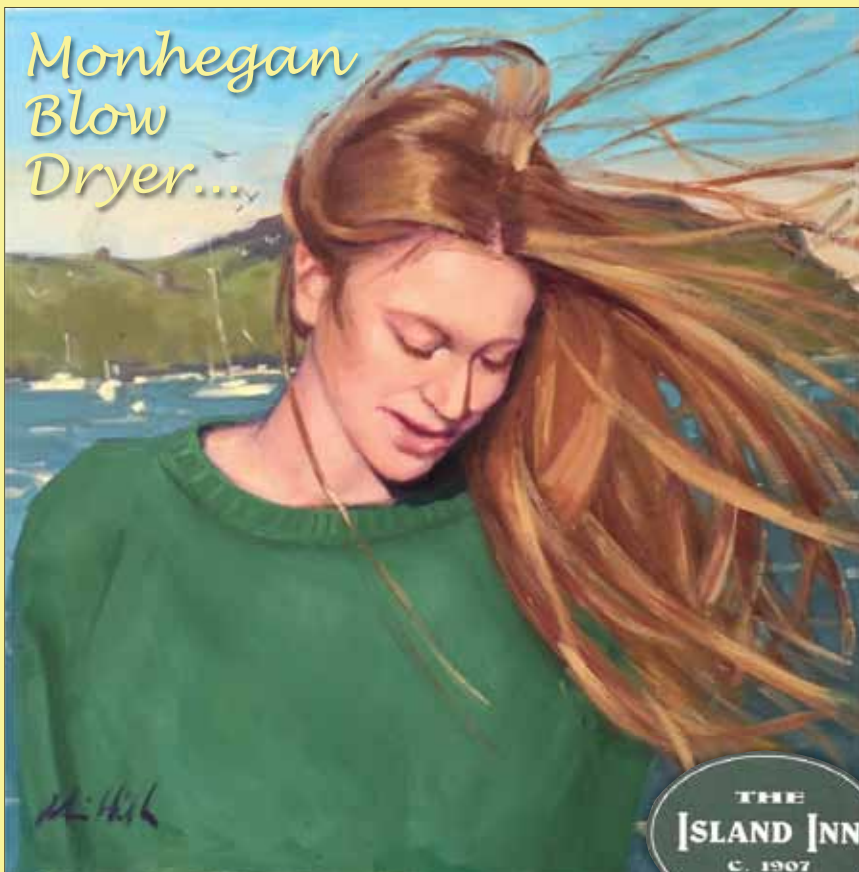
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## HUNGRY EYE

upscale sandwich-type foods now. They're everywhere [in New York City], but they weren't anywhere until the first one."

A film-major dropout from the State University of New York at Purchase ("I wasn't really good at school"), Charles never attended culinary school. "Not too many of us did back then, really." She remarks that many of today's young cooks think being a chef means culinary school, working for a big shot chef, becoming a big shot chef, and getting a TV show.

"I train my cooks," she says. "I train their training out of them. I don't think technique and consistency are things many of them are interested in." I remark that her host and waiters at Pearl in New York are remarkably hospitable. "I want my waiters to have fine-dining experience—but they're sick of it—so they still know their stuff."

And while she's in Kennebunk getting Spat Oyster Cellar open, where does Charles eat? "I really like the fish sandwich called 'A Fish Called Wanda' at Allison's. If I want clams, I'll go to the Clam Shack on the bridge." ■

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