

For fine dining & fun, Jack Baker's is the answer

By Erica Florentine

Over 50 years ago, in Point Pleasant Beach, there lived a man and his wife, each of whom had a heart the size of a 5-pound lobster.

The happy couple dedicated night after night to providing a scenic restaurant-type experience for friends and family who would swing by their home after work to enjoy a glass of wine and some seafood. The cuisine epitomized the term "fresh," as it was caught and prepared the same day by the man of the hour — Jack Baker.

Decades later, the Bakers' four-table backyard digs on the Manasquan River has morphed into an empire. The Jack Baker name is now a familiar one, from Florida all the way up the coastline, to Maine.

In total, Chefs International Inc., the company that owns and operates Jack Baker's Lobster Shanty, the Wharfside Restaurant and Wharfside Patio Bar in Point Pleasant Beach, runs nine restaurants, six of which are in New Jersey, with another three in Florida.

The company is currently owned by the Lombardi brothers of northern New Jersey, which include Robert, Joseph, Michael, Stephen and Anthony Lombardi. The brothers are a group of professionals who purchased the company in 1999 and have been perfecting it ever since.

"It's not just your typical set of restaurants," said Bob Cooper, President of Chefs International, describing the flavor each eatery brings to the table. "They are multiple concepts, and they are all in unique locations."

In this area, it is all about those Point Beach hot spots, where the story all began. Whether a customer is hungry for a basket of chicken fingers washed down with a bottled beer, a filet mignon dinner accompanied by the sounds of a pianist, or simply looking for a venue to hold a gathering, one of these local restaurants will be



What a catch! Mark D'Angelo, Executive Chef with Chefs International, Inc. restaurants, and company President Bob Cooper hoisted a basket of fresh lobsters, ready for the kitchen. Chefs International owns Point Pleasant Beach's Lobster Shanty, Wharfside Restaurant and Wharfside Patio Bar.

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able to provide just what is needed.

The Lobster Shanty is located on Channel Drive in the exact place where Mr. Baker's home once stood, along the Manasquan Inlet.

"It's a stunning atmosphere," Mr. Cooper said, adding that the food served at the Lobster Shanty is also quite exquisite.

"We offer a wide variety of seafood," Mr. Cooper said.

At the Lobster Shanty — a place that is not only a restaurant, but a banquet hall as well — diners would not be surprised to find an upscale, first-class experience, complete with a dining room pianist.

"We've had so many people come in and say, 'I remember coming here as a kid, and I would want this to be the place I get married,'" Mr. Cooper said, describing the atmosphere at Mr. Baker's first place of business.

Next door, diners can tone down their dress code and amp up their desire to boogie the night away at the Wharfside Patio Bar.

Recently, the place has gotten a bit of a facelift, and the Patio Bar has become quite the hot spot on warm summer days.

"We thought, 'This could really be something here,'" Mr. Cooper said, reflecting on the company's recent decision to update and enlarge the bar, add more live entertainment and enhance the menu.

"We provide far better entertainment than people are expecting," Mr. Cooper said.

Some of the summer's live entertainment includes Brian Kirk and the Jirks, BStreets, the Pat Roddy Band, Undisputed and the Mike Dalton Band, just to name a few.

As an added draw to the Point Beach restaurants, there is never a charge for parking, and free valet service is offered throughout the summer.

"And the prices are reasonable," Mr. Cooper added. "You can bring your family here — it's a real locals-type place."

"We're fortunate in that we have something for everybody," Mr. Cooper said.

Aloha summer — the Point Beach restaurants are already seeing crowds of sundress-clad,

boat shoes-wearing summer revelers, just a few weeks into the season.

"You look out there and you feel like you're on vacation," Mr. Cooper said.

And what would be a true summer dining experience at the Jersey Shore without plenty of lobster?

Adjacent to the Patio Bar is the company's own lobster pound, stocked with catches fresh off the boat.

"We have an incredible variety of fish, great steaks, and I'd put our ribs up against anybody's," Mr. Cooper said.

Mr. Cooper said there are a few "core recipes" that have remained in the company for years, and proven to keep people coming back for more. Chefs International's soups, for instance, are one-of-a-kind and are all made on-site.

Mr. Cooper said much of the company's current success can be traced directly back to Mr. Baker's days of whipping up home-cooked meals on his back porch.

"I couldn't be more proud to have worked for him," Mr. Cooper said. "Jack did this, and Tony [Papalia, the company's president before Mr. Cooper] refined it, and I'm happy to have had a hand in it."

Mr. Cooper joined the business in 1982, working part-time in whatever role he was needed. He has done it all, from cooking to washing dishes, waiting tables to manning the bar.

"You just did whatever Jack asked you to do," Mr. Cooper recalled, with a smile.

Following his schooling, Mr. Cooper intended to become a teacher, but this was not what Mr. Baker had planned. Mr. Cooper was quickly convinced to return to his place at the company and worked his way up the ladder, following in the footsteps of Mr. Papalia, his predecessor as president of Chefs International.

After all, once a staff member gets a taste of what the company has to offer, it is rare they will let go anytime soon, he said.

"If you needed a job in the summer, you went to Jack," Mr. Cooper said, recalling how some of the employees got involved with the Chefs International

restaurants. "I can't count the number of people who have worked their way through college at these restaurants."

Roaming between the Point Beach restaurants on a Friday afternoon, it seems as though every other employee one passes has called the company home since childhood, and each is eager to tell his or her tale.

"It's always been a family business," Mr. Cooper said, pointing out some of the restaurants' longtime employees.

There is Marty Fletcher, current Chefs International Chief Financial Officer and Controller. He has been with the company for over 30 years.

Up the road, at Wharfside Patio Bar, is Jacque Higgins, who is in charge of special events and entertainment. She has been a part of this "great company" for decades, she said.

Standing next to her is Mark D'Angelo, executive chef of the company. Since 1989, Mr. D'Angelo has made sure each and every person dining at the Chefs International restaurants leaves wanting more.

Holding down the fort at the Patio Bar is Mark DuBois, manager and longtime employee of Chefs International. The self-proclaimed "Jersey boy" has stayed close to his roots and admits he has "grown up in these restaurants."

As for Mr. Baker, who currently resides in Maine, he said recently he could not be more pleased with the way his family of employees has grown over the years.

"Oh, I'm just delighted," Mr. Baker said one recent afternoon.

"This was a life's work for me," he added.

Mr. Baker said what started as a small business grew rapidly.

"We just kept adding on and adding on," he said. "Everybody was building, but no one was building on the water like we did. And it soon became very popular."

"I had a lot of fun building the business," Mr. Baker continued. "I had a lot of happy years there."

Mr. Baker said he is thankful to have Mr. Cooper running the show in Point Beach, and likes to keep up on how things there are progressing.

"Every time I talk to him, he gets excited to hear how things are going," Mr. Cooper said, of the Chefs International founder.

Mr. Cooper said one of the greatest things about his job is seeing how proud Mr. Baker is on his trips down to the Jersey Shore, when he gets to see his legacy here.

Jack Baker's Lobster Shanty is located at 82 Channel Drive in Point Pleasant Beach, and can be contacted at 732-899-6700. The Wharfside Restaurant and Patio Bar are located at 101 Channel Drive, and can be contacted at 732-892-9100.

For a listing of each of the Chefs International restaurants' menus, visit the Lobster Shanty's Web site, at jackbakerslobstershanty.com.

The site includes links to the rest of the Chefs International restaurants' sites, including the Toms River Lobster Shanty, Hightstown Lobster Shanty, Escondidos and Moore's Tavern — all of which are located in New Jersey — as well as the Cocoa Beach Lobster Shanty, Vero Beach Lobster Shanty and Mr. Manatee's, all in Florida.