The Lobsterman's Trap

Word and Images by Aubrey White

It takes a lobsterman as tough as Julie Eaton to make it through the Maine winter and a season of record low lobster prices.

Julie Eaton married her husband for his "wicked firm bottom." She wets her thin lips at its very mention, clenches her jaw and inhales sharply through closed teeth. Julie didn't marry Sidney Eaton until 38, and the tardiness of romance has left her libidinous as a teenager. But her brash tone may serve another purpose—helping her find a place amongst men. In taking the Eaton name, Julie married into a bounteous ocean bottom, a territorially rigid lobstering ground, and an industry dominated by men.

Amidst a strenous day hauling traps, Julie Eaton finds a moment to flirt.

She has no birthright to fish these waters off the coast of Deer Isle, Maine. Born on the mainland, her access to Deer Isle's lobster was strictly contingent upon her behavior as an outsider wanting in. After twenty years of lobstering and seven years on these grounds, she is quick to correct any misnomer. Driving her boat, the 'Catsass' out to sea, mascara-clad eyes squinting at the sunrise, a 100 cigarette dangling from her mouth, Julie declares, "I'm not a lobsterwoman or a lobsterlady." She exhales a puff of smoke. "I'm a lobsterman. I've earned that, you know. I do just what the boys do. I've earned that."

In her orange oil slicks and black waders, Julie epitomizes the image of the lobsterman: gruff, fearlessly independent, wary of and victim to a legion of regulations that threaten her species. If you ask Julie how she prefers to spend her time, you'll likely hear one of two answers: on the water or in bed with Sid. Like so many others who take to the water, the thought of reporting to a boss or shuffling paper represents the dredges of labor.

And we as consumers are obsessed with the image she conjures. You have to wonder, is it really the flavor of lobster we're infatuated with, or more the idyll of ocean freedom and the self-employed? The backdrop of Julie's daily work is perhaps the most beautiful you could ask for—a scattering of rocky outcroppings and lush green islands across the horizon that eventually merge into mainland. Of course, most of us choose health insurance and a 401K in lieu of the open seas. But Julie, now 45, thinks the opposite: "There's not retirement, there's no, you know, benefits that way. I don't [ever] plan on retiring, so I guess I don't need retirement." Sid, 65, also shows no signs of slowing down.

For Julie, the freedom defies the need for security. But if you really look at it, the lobstering life is bound by rope and buoy to one thing: the market. At the end of every day, Julie sells her lobsters to the same buying station for whatever price is offered. And with this, the second year of national recession, Julie garners the painfully low price of $2.70 per pound.

But isn't lobster is an expensive delicacy, a luxury item that connotes celebration and prosperity? Seafood restaurant giant Red Lobster recently conducted a poll declaring that four out of ten men and women still consider lobster the most

Nearing the end of the season, Julie brings a sternwoman aboard to help end the day before sunset.

romantic meal to have when popping the question. Cracking shells and slurping the meat from lobster claws is sexy and screams of a prosperous future with your mate.

Julie's seen the menus. "Lobster salad, market price. Lobster chowder, market price. Well, I know what market price is. I sell to the market. 'Hey, honey, market price. Let's have lobster dinners. We'll have six lobsters apiece. That's $2.70 a pound.' They're like, 'no no no, market price is $21.99'... how do you justify that? We're getting paid $2.70, they're being trucked down the road, across the road, and they're $21.99. Add an ear of corn and a baked potato, there you go," she says. "Who the hell's market was that? Because it certainly wasn't mine."

So what happens between Julie's $2.70 per pound and the pricey lobster dinners where breaking the chest cavity of a steaming bug is interrupted by a man on one knee asking for his lover's hand in marriage?

If you ask Julie where her lobsters go after being sold to the dealer, she'll tell you she doesn't know. If you ask a worker at her buying station, his answer is not much different. "[We] weigh 'em up, take 'em up, they go right in the tank...they grade 'em...They ship 'em out."

Once off Julie's boat, lobster can meet a variety of fates. Some are trucked off Deer Isle and taken to restaurants in Boston, or all the way to JFK airport in New York City. Shipments as heavy as a ton leave JFK daily, bound for cities as far as Los Angeles or even Europe. Other lobsters are sent to processing facilities in Canada. Some sit in ocean cages, or lobster pounds, waiting for buyers.

Though they leave the lobsterman's hands at barely $3 a pound, distributors sell to restaurants at around $7 per pound plus the costs of shipping. Restaurants factor in the cost of labor and luxury and call it market price. At the high-end seafood restaurant Boston Legal, a one-and-a-half pound lobster, "shipped from the boat to the restaurant," is $39.95.

But the lobster prices at the grocery store are remarkably cheap—as low as $5.99 a pound in Maine's Hannaford markets. In either case, the true cost of lobster goes unrepresented. Lobstermen like Julie see nothing of expensive restaurant prices. And the low prices she receives,

translated into cheap lobster in tiny tanks at grocery stores, barely cover her costs.

On a day nearing the end of the lobstering season, Julie brought in 130 pounds of lobster. That's about $350 gross profit. $150 of that goes towards fuel and bait each day. At the beginning of October, Julie struggles more and more with bringing her catch in before sunset. To help her end the days a bit more swiftly, a distant cousin serves as Julie's sternwoman. Julie pays her $100 for the day, leaving Julie with $100, barely enough to cover the wear and tear on the boat, let alone an hourly wage. With a month left to fish this season, each day's catch looks just as grim.

As Julie and Sid pull their traps from the water for the final time this season, their earnings are $55,000 shy of last year's. With an income source that disappears with the warm weather, the priority rests on pre-paying for the winter. Julie and Sid pay their bills a year in advance, drain their bank accounts of almost everything in order to stock up. "[I buy] everything that I can possibly buy a year ahead so that when we're all done fishing, the oil barrel is full, so we know we'll have heat. Our pantry is stocked, along with any other cubbyhole I can tuck anything into, so I know that we're gonna eat." Their pantry is filled with five-pound bags of pasta and stewed tomatoes; stacked in the spare bedroom are pallets of canned goods and root beer.

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"This year, like most fishermen, we won't have anything extra. It's just, it's a total fight with both of us fishing just to break even." This year the loss in revenue has meant their house payment is covered for only six months, leaving them wondering how to earn the rest before next year's season begins.

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Julie's fought plenty to make a living. At the age of 23, she studied aeronautical science with dreams of becoming a pilot. Just before those dreams came to fruition, she was struck by a cement truck while driving to work in a wretched snowstorm. After several comatose months, Julie faced a long recovery to bring back her ability to speak, her ability to walk properly, and her memory. After a year of intensive therapy at her parents' house, Julie found herself ready to leave. "Now, whether I was actually ready or not, it's hard to tell…When I cut the apron strings I probably had the mental ability of a 16 year-old … But I was in a body much older than that, so, I did it … Somehow I needed that to keep growing."

To keep growing, Julie started to fish. Living on the island of Vinalhaven, Maine for eight years, Julie learned to lobster from locals while living in a small boathouse lacking both heat and running water. "A lot of times it would be colder in the winter in my boat house than it would be outside because it held the cold… It was just brutal. But I survived it and I learned so much about what I need, and what I want."

Today, the pull of the lobster industry leaves Julie and Sid with lives revolving around their traps. Their home, a double-wide prefab with ocean décor throughout, is far from Deer Isle's tourist-inundated town of Stonington; it is tucked away from the beaten path of art galleries and bed and breakfasts. The shoreline is reserved for those with summer homes and, according to Julie, those who complain about the sound of boat engines in the early morning. During fishing season, Julie and Sid rise around 6:00 am to check the weather and watch for wind as the sun comes up. Julie prepares a 44-ounce mug of coffee and they leave their house by 7:00 am.

Neither eats breakfast; neither brings a lunch. They work through the day with only the catch on their minds. It isn't until after they've sold their lobster, parked the boat, and returned home that they both realize how famished they've become. Julie serves up heaping plates of American chop

suey, a cheap way for both to take in the day's calories in a single meal. During the lobster season, each loses about 40 pounds, only to put it back come winter.

Julie generally lobsters alone aboard her boat, and Sid aboard his. Working apart helps double their household income, but also allows each to captain their own boat. When the two first married, Sid asked Julie to serve as sternman for his boat. "To which I replied, smiling, 'Hell no.' And I said to him, 'Would you like to stern for me?' And he smiled at me and said 'Not a chance in hell.'"

But the two are bound together by fishing. Julie shares, fondly, the line that made her fall for Sid. "Come aboard dear. And make yer dory fast." Translation: Come aboard dear, and tie your dingy up next to mine. A man at a seafood restaurant can kneel and impress a mate with the luxury of a lobster, but it takes the language of the sea to win a fellow fisherman.

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So, aboard her own boat, but with frequent conversations over the two-way radio with Sid, Julie hauls her traps each day through the summer and early fall. Hoisting the traps to the railing, swinging each around ninety degrees to reach the bungee cord latch, Julie sorts her catch. Few traps contain more than a couple of worthy lobsters. Most are too small. Some are actually Peekytoe crabs. A few are female lobsters filled with eggs. Julie remarks that with each of these pregnant lobsters, you can gaze into the future. And though today's catch is dim, the future looks bright.

The grounds Julie fishes are not only "wicked firm," they're also healthy and well managed. "We cultivate them, our lobsters, like they cultivate potatoes," Julie says. "We're very protective of our egged females [and] our little lobsters ... 90% of the lobsters I [catch] I throw overboard." Maine fishermen operate under strict regulations to only take lobsters of appropriate size, to leave larger breeders in the water, and to toss back pregnant females.

With regulations long in place, the fishery has grown to nothing shy of fertile. Julie and others are proud of their practices, and her attitude towards new regulations and those who create them is quite simple: "They don't want to know what we have to say... They've made up their mind, and this is the way it's gonna be." To Julie and fellow lobstermen, their longevity and history in these parts speaks to one central point—these are our grounds and we can take care of them just fine.

Ted Ames, operator of Deer Isle's lobster hatchery, calls the lobster fishery the healthiest in New England. "So today when you have groundfish and other shellfish collapsing," he says, "the lobster fishery just keeps getting bigger and bigger."

The hatchery that Ames operates was an initiative of Deer Isle's local lobstermen, who observed lowered populations in areas and sought a solution to ecological damage. The hatchery raises lobster in a safe environment until their survival rates are steady, releasing the babies (barely an inch long) into the more ravaged ocean bottoms around the island. Ames calls their work a 'band-aid' that serves to protect the area's ecosystem more than the lobster market. The hatchery itself is an anomaly in Maine, one of few sites where fishermen actively pushed for resource renewal.

But if you look closely at this island's steps to fortify its ocean, you'll discover with it what may be the industry's Achilles heel. "We're our own worst enemy," says Ames. In following regulations, in cultivating a healthy fishery, the industry has nearly outgrown itself. According to Ames, "there's so many lobsters that they can't sell [them] fast enough."

By her estimates, Julie caught more lobster this year than in any previous year. According to the owner of one of

Julie and Sid work together just once a year, when the season ends and they haul traps in for the winter.

Deer Isle's wholesale lobster dealers, his incoming stock was up this year. The state of Maine is confident enough in the fishery's health that they've initiated the process to assess and certify the state's stock as sustainable.

Seeing such low prices at the buying station, the only way for Julie to make a living is to increase her catch. It is capitalism at its best—the treadmill that forces you to keep running faster or get off. So the logic seems to make sense: by keeping populations up, they can keep catching more, keep selling more, and make a better living. But the trouble is cyclical: catching too many lobsters will flood the market; too few may leave fishermen parched.

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With money as tight as it is this season, the idea of catching even one fewer lobster or setting one fewer trap may seem suicidal. According to Ames, that scaling back is exactly what fishermen need to do to survive. "The industry is really having to look at itself. One of the things that they have to deal with is: are we getting too big? Are we becoming the elephant in the garden? … The price of fuel has sky rocketed. Bait prices have sky rocketed. They're predicting that next year there won't be enough bait to go around at all. And these guys have to look themselves in the mirror and say, wait a minute, this is not the way to run a business." Ames' suggestions are for fishermen to hold back, to protect the market by fishing less in the summer, leaving more lobsters to catch in the fall and winter. Reduce traps, rein it in, maintain a small industry despite a fecund supply.

Anticipating fuel and bait hikes, lowered lobsters prices, and an altogether shaky market, Julie and Sid started cutting back three years ago. "[Sid] and I have already cut our gear in half from what we're allowed to fish. We each fish four hundred [traps]... We take as little bait as possible to do the job.

We don't waste it, not a fish. We've already done the cutting back and are having one hell of a struggle."

As for Julie fishing the winter, leaving the house is difficult enough; the open ocean is out of the question. But if fishermen were regulated to catch into the winter, those aboard small, uncovered boats would be out of business, replaced by boats with larger crews and the capacity to handle the weather and off-shore winter lobstering.

For Julie, the needed change comes back to the restaurant. "The only way that we're going to be able to keep supplying restaurants is for them to be able to work with us. Or

they won't get the product period, because we won't be able to go [fishing]...We're not asking for a handout, we're asking for a fair shake." If the market price at restaurants fails to reflect Julie's reality, she fears the fishermen's only solution is a tie up—a full-on strike to freeze the market.

Julie's and Ames' solutions seem drastically different. Ames suggests protecting the lobster as a luxury, Julie wants to see it sold at more accessible prices to increase its sales. For Ames, the solution rests in the hands of fishermen. Julie sees her hands as tied. Even with efforts to conserve, Julie and Sid are left wondering how to make it through next year if the market fails to improve.

There is, however, common ground between these two divergent perspectives. If Julie and Sid are among few fishermen who make those cutbacks, they may continue to struggle. But if the fishing community conserves together, they may create a collective impact.

The lobstering industry can function as a "strong economic engine" when it's healthy. Fishermen return their profits to their communities and help them thrive. "In a fishing community, if the fishermen hurt, everybody hurts. You know

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the shopkeepers hurt, the gas stations hurt. The plumbers, the electricians have no work because nobody can afford to do anything. Everybody hurts if the fishermen hurt." And in a year when fishermen are leaving the business for economic survival, the whole island feels it. Once the tourists and summer residents have left, Deer Isle falls quiet.

Throughout the winter, only a single restaurant stays open on Deer Isle. The Harbor Cafe offers buy-one-get-one-free specials on Monday nights to keep the locals coming in, and the line to eat is out the door. In a time of hibernation and anticipation of another season, the cafe serves as a community center for fishermen and friends. On a lucky Monday you'll find Julie there, starting food fights with other locals and pinching the backsides of unsuspecting men.

Still, there is work to be done all through the winter. Back at the Eaton residence, with the first snow falling, Julie and Sid prepare to bear down for the winter: fix the boats, paint the buoys, wait for next year and hope for a change.