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Store to send lobsters gently into that good pot

Whole Foods waives ban on live sales in Maine

By Raja Mishra, Globe Staff | February 8, 2007

Transforming the rough craft of lobstering into a gentle art, a New Hampshire outfit has persuaded [Whole Foods Market](#) to waive its ban on live lobster sales at a new store opening next week in Portland, Maine.

For Whole Foods, an upscale grocery chain promising "animal compassionate" foods, the decision marks yet another effort to provide its customers with the delicacy while giving the lobsters what it considers a decent demise. Whole Foods brought a national debate to a boil last year after it first offered little condos for lobsters in holding pens so the animals would not attack each other, and then scuttled the idea and banned all live lobster sales, equating current lobster catch-and-ship techniques with torture.

But the Little Bay Lobster Co. of Newington, N.H., had developed a method to deliver the freshest, healthiest lobsters to stores -- not to please the lobsters, but to fatten its profits. The firm's "two-touch" lobster harvesting method -- in which the animals go from boat to store with minimal contact with humans and other lobsters -- deeply impressed Whole Foods executives when they visited Little Bay.

"We did it for the bottom line. But in the end, it achieved Whole Foods' goals," said Craig Rief, Little Bay's president and chief executive officer.

Texas-based Whole Foods, the nation's largest retailer of natural and organic foods, said its ban on live lobster sales will continue at its other 191 stores around North America and the United Kingdom because it considers longer journeys harmful to the lobsters' well-being.

"Human beings are all going to die, too. But the quality of life is important while we're alive. It is the same with animals," said David Lannon, Whole Foods' North Atlantic regional president.

At the Portland store, which opens Wednesday, workers will use a "CrustaStun" device to instantaneously kill lobsters with 110 volts rather than steaming, which Whole Foods considers unethical because it can take several minutes for the hard-shelled animal to die. Customers will still be able to purchase live lobsters and kill them at home.

All lobsters that have been at the store for seven days -- tracked by color-coded claw bands -- will be zapped and end up in the deli as lobster salad or other delicacies. Store officials said one week, even in separate compartments in the store's pen, is long enough.

Even after it announced the national ban last year, Whole Foods studied the possibility of selling lobster at its Portland store as part of its commitment to using local foods. During this time, officials learned of Little Bay.

Little Bay had long sought better ways of getting fresh and healthy lobsters to customers in Europe and Asia, where shipping can take 24 or more hours and sickly lobsters often die en route. Studies indicated that about 5 percent of lobsters die in transport, costing the Maine lobster industry up to \$20 million annually, said Rief. Lobsters spoil rapidly after they die and most customers will only accept them alive.

Rief's team reasoned that minimizing lobster handling would lessen the chances of injury. They also knew that storing lobsters together, where the crustaceans often turn on each other, was a problem.

In Little Bay's new method, lobstermen transfer lobsters straight from traps into individual containers that go directly to stores. In traditional methods, lobsters go from traps into crowded holding pens, then to wharf crates, then on to grading facilities where they are handled again, then into shipping boxes, and finally into store holding tanks.

For Whole Foods, Little Bay will contract with lobstermen from Vinalhaven, Maine, because they will be able to ship lobster from the dock to the Portland store in about an hour.

"Our method arguably puts a better product on the table," said Rief. He said the lobstermen supplying Whole Foods would be paid more but his costs would be more than compensated by money saved from lower lobster mortality. The new method had zero mortality during recent 7- to 30-day test periods, said Rief.

When Whole Foods announced its ban on live lobsters last summer, it did not go over too well with most Maine lobstermen, said Kristen Millar, executive director of the Maine Lobster Promotion Council. They felt offended that their practices, honed over centuries, were suddenly under fire, she said. Yesterday, once again, Millar said eyebrows were raised.

"It's a flip-flop from their position this summer," she said. "We like it that they're selling lobster, but we don't like the fact they think they can do it better than the 7,000 lobstermen in Maine."

Millar said all Maine lobstermen strive to bring customers healthy and fresh food.

As for animal rights groups, officials at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, which has long opposed live lobster sales, appeared somewhat of two minds.

"PETA certainly wishes that live lobsters weren't sold anywhere, but Whole Foods should be commended for showing that these lobsters aren't subjected to the worse abuses," said Matt Prescott, PETA's manager of factory farming campaigns. "But it is easy to switch to the delicious vegetarian options out there."■

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