

Arizona lobster roll chain buys processing plant and wharf in Maine

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By Tim Cebula

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Angie's Lobster, an Arizona-based, drive-thru restaurant chain, has purchased a 60,000-square-foot lobster processing plant from Shucks Maine Lobster and a wharf in Harpswell. Tony Christofellis, founder of Angie's Lobster, shakes hands with Justin Leeman on Wednesday while visiting the wharf in Harpswell. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

A growing Arizona restaurant chain is snapping up pieces of Maine's lobster industry, buying a Bailey Island wharf and now a Richmond lobster processor, so that it can keep selling cheap lobster rolls at its drive-thru locations.

Angie's Lobster bought a processing plant from Shucks Maine Lobster last month, adding to the family-owned wharf in Harpswell it purchased in late July to source lobster for the company. Angie's officials would not say what they paid for either purchase.

Launched in November 2021, the chain, which has two locations outside of Phoenix and plans to open three more by the end of the year, sells lobster roll meals (including a drink and fries) for \$7.99 to \$9.99, prices company officials say they can offer because they "chase efficiencies" throughout their operational system. The purchase of the wharf and Shucks plant are two such efficiencies, cutting out third-party lobster buyers and processors.

Representatives of the Maine Lobstermen's Association and Maine Lobster Dealers' Association did not return messages Wednesday evening requesting interviews about the sale.

Angie's puts a quarter pound (4 ounces) of lobster in each 6-inch, split-top bun, which, though smaller than some, is a standard-size lobster roll. The chain said that some of the cost savings that enable it to keep prices low come from using simple paper packaging and building drive-thru-only restaurants, where customers process their own payments and grab their own orders in a pickup area, allowing for less staffing than other quick-service restaurants, the company said.

Savings from the chain's ultra-efficient business model get passed to Angie's customers, but its workers benefit as well. Starting pay at Angie's Arizona restaurants is \$16 an hour, in a state with a \$12.80 minimum wage.

The Shucks plant deal put about 50 Maine-based employees on the company's payroll, and Angie's already has given all full-timers raises between 10 and 20 percent as well as health insurance.

"We're in this for the long run," said Angie's co-owner Tony Christofellis. He aims to expand the chain in the Mountain and Southwest regions, where he said drive-thru restaurants are very popular. "We want to leave no oxygen for competitors. And to do that, you have to pay your team members the most and treat them with respect."



Travis Shaw, the plant's shipping and receiving manager, prepares lobster for shipment Wednesday.
Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

Christofellis, who co-founded and runs Angie's with his wife, Roushan, said staff at Angie's are called "team members."

"The word 'employee' is very transactional. We never use that," he said, adding that his company will offer a 0.2 percent ownership stake to full-time staff members after five years of service.

"We believe by paying the team the most, giving the consumer the lowest prices and chasing efficiencies, we can do things that others can't," Christofellis said. "We've always invested in our team."

Angie's new Maine staff members – two wharf workers and almost 50 people at the plant, eight of whom are salaried – seemed both grateful and bullish on their futures with the company.

"Angie's is bringing in a lot of support and also a financial benefit," said Travis Shaw, who served as shipping and receiving manager at the 62,000-square-foot Shucks processing plant for the last seven years and will continue in the same role for Angie's. "They want to pay people the most in the industry. They found a great team here at Shucks, and they're willing to pay for it."

"Working with Tony has honestly changed my life in a lot of great ways," said Nick Christensen, manager at the Abner Point Road wharf on Bailey Island, where he has worked for 20 years. "He increased the pay for me and my wife quite significantly. He was able to change a lot of the things on the wharf we've always wanted to do but were unable."

Since taking over the wharf at the beginning of July, Angie's has added a new forklift and box truck to the operation, reinforced the wharf structurally and outfitted the bait shed with new refrigeration and insulation, giving the bait an extra week of freshness before it spoils, Christofellis estimated.



Christofellis talks to lobstermen while visiting the wharf in Harpswell on Wednesday. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

“It was a game-changer for us because our bait stays fresher longer, and it helps our lobstermen increase their catch,” Christensen said. “Those things are huge.”

“Aside from the raises, whatever we need to make work flow smoother, they’re getting it for us,” Shaw said. “In other processing plants I know, they don’t go about swinging the bat like that for their employees. Tony and Roushan have a completely different outlook. They are very much into the idea that happy employees make happy customers.”

Not everyone is sanguine about the Angie’s deal. Christofellis said he has heard directly from Maine residents who are concerned about possible consequences.

“I think there’s fear we’re going to do something negative to the community,” he said. “They believe because we’re selling \$9.99 lobster meals, that we’re going to drive down the price of lobster for the boats.”

To the contrary, he said, he expects to increase demand for lobster, driving prices up as well.

“We see the lobster boats as part of the team,” Christofellis said. “We take care of them by giving them the highest prices for lobster, and the lowest prices for bait and fuel. The boats that we work with will make more money per year with us than anywhere else.”

Christofellis said the Angie's ethos was inspired in part by the company's namesake, his late mother, a Greek immigrant and single parent who raised him and his siblings in Boston, working "front-line" seafood restaurant jobs to pay bills, and later opening her own seafood restaurant.

"Our mission is to make lobster affordable to more people," he said. "Lobster is the ultimate luxury food. And if we can give the front-line people more access to it than they had before, then it'll bring them more happiness."

"I think we're providing a service, to be able to let people eat lobster for less than a Chick-fil-A meal," said Shaw, who believes he's developed a good feel for the general mood at the plant.

"Everybody here is excited about what we're a part of right now," Shaw said. "This feels like a career, and a company you can grow with. It feels like we're building something really special."

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