



CELEBRATING  
55 YEARS

# nerej

## Legal Sea Foods

November 06, 2008 - Spotlights

What's the secret of success for a family of restaurants thriving for 50 years in the ultra-competitive world of upscale dining? One simple answer: "If it isn't fresh, it isn't Legal!"

Born in Cambridge

It all started on Hampshire St. in Cambridge's Inman Sq. Back in 1904, Harry Berkowitz opened the Legal Cash Market grocery where customers were given "Legal Stamps" (forerunners of S&H green stamps) with their purchases. In 1950, his son George opened the Legal Sea Foods Fish Market in the adjacent space. A noted resident of Cambridge, Julia Child, discovered the place in the 1960s and showcased the fresh fish from Legal Sea Foods on her highly-rated Public Broadcasting System (PBS) cooking show. A star was born - eighteen years later came the first restaurant. Although the trappings weren't fancy - just paper plates and picnic tables - the seafood was second to none and word spread quickly.

Over time, the company cast a wider net and expanded to downtown Boston, nearby Chestnut Hill, and other Boston suburbs before eventually springing to points well beyond the Massachusetts border.

But Cambridge remained a touchstone for this homegrown company. The legend of the original Inman Sq. operation still looms large in the minds of many. And today the city hosts two busy locations, in Kendall Sq. and Charles Sq.

Back in 1982, The Cambridge Express reported on Legal's planned move to the developing Kendall Sq. area. "The new restaurant shares its block of Main St.," the story stated, "with several mixed-use facilities still under construction. In fact, the building that houses the 9,000 s/f restaurant appears to be the only completed structure in the area."

Legal Sea Foods appeared to be taking a risk on an unproven business neighborhood, but the Berkowitz family trusted its instincts and local experience. The article continued, quoting Roger Berkowitz, son of the original owner and now president and CEO of the restaurant group: "If we had to pick our favorite customers...Cambridge would rank #1, hands down. My father sees people when he comes in here who dealt with my grandfather. That's nostalgia....We firmly believe we made a great decision coming to this area." Better parking, more opportunity for growth, and "being right smack in the middle of things" were among Berkowitz's reasons for the choice.

Another boon to immediate success in Kendall Sq. was the burgeoning MIT campus and the marked influx of Asian students who were far more familiar with fresh seafood than most American consumers. Likewise, the Charles Sq. restaurant, opened in 2003 in the shadow of Harvard Yard and in close proximity to Central Sq., proved a hit. It was designed to evoke a low-key neighborhood atmosphere in tribute to the Inman Sq. original which started it all.

So, to make a long, 50 year story a bit shorter, Legal Sea Foods started as a fish market. Still today, it considers itself a fish company that also operates restaurants.

Legal Sea Foods has always set the standard for seafood quality and freshness, proving that a consistent, high-quality dining experience never goes out of style. If there's ever a doubt, the wait lines outside of its restaurants attest to its enduring appeal.

And while Julia Child was the first to shine the spotlight, Legal Sea Foods has garnered a boat-load of accolades and honors, including: "Best Seafood Restaurant in America" - NBC Today Show, "Top 10 Tried-and-True Restaurants in America" - Bon Appetit, "#1 Best Family Friendly Restaurant" - Parents Magazine and the honor of serving its legendary New England Clam Chowder at every presidential inauguration since 1981.

Legal Sea Foods has been so recognized for many reasons, chief among them their industry-leading practices and accomplishments related to food safety and hospitality such as: (1) the practice of buying only from day-boat fisherman or top-of-catch which ensures that only the freshest, highest quality seafood available is served; (2) their role in helping the Food and Drug Administration develop the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) program for handling seafood and then their own in-house program for seafood testing which exceeds national standards; (3) their work with the Harvard School of Public Health to raise public awareness of the dangers of trans fats, which they eliminated from all menu offerings back in 2003; and (4) their mission as a family-owned business which all staff share - "to treat guests as if they were eating at your own home table."

Three generations of Berkowitz men have been at the helm of the Legal enterprise and, over time, it has grown. Legal Sea Foods has now dropped anchor in Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, Washington DC, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Atlanta and Florida in addition to Massachusetts. Along the Eastern Seaboard there are 33 restaurants, including two additional restaurant concepts LTK (Legal Test Kitchen) and Legal C Bar.

Demand necessitated the upstart of additional distribution outlets. A mail-order division developed in 1976 has sent fish flying all over the continental U.S. in gourmet gift packages. A catering facility located at the Exchange Conference Center on Boston Fish Pier hosts business and social gatherings and provides a home-base for a catering department that services the greater Boston area with clambakes and the like. Most recently, a burgeoning retail division provides product where guests want it - for example, at Fenway Park (New England Clam Chowder keeps fans cheering on early spring days and late fall nights) and also at select supermarkets.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540