

# A Summer Place

From humble ice cream shack to local landmark

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By Lisa Reisman  
Special to the Times

**Y**OU SENSE IT when you hear the hum of your tires on the steel grid deck of the bridge, when you roll down your windows, smell the salt air and feel the warm sun on your face.

You know it when you see the forest of sailboat masts rising up from Pilot's Point Marina on one side of Westbrook's famed Singing Bridge and on the other, the colorful café umbrellas on the deck of Bill's Seafood in Westbrook.

Summer is here.

They come from up and down the shoreline, from all parts of the state, from Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Long Island. They come by car, by pickup truck, by Harley Davidson, by raft, by kayak, by rowboat, by 35-foot cruiser or 50-foot sailboat. If the craft can't fit under the bridge's 5 ½ foot high-tide clearance, no problem. They just dock it in a nearby marina and dinghy over.

They come for the aura of nostalgia that pervades the place, for the wonder that the ice cream shop that a local schoolteacher started in 1950 on a gravelly pitch of land would become a hotdog stand that would become the clam shack, Del's Fish and Chips, and that owner Robert "Butch" Claffey would eventually build into an iconic summer eatery. All this, without taking out so much as a single advertisement in the almost 30 years he's been at the helm.

They come for the aroma

of fried clams and roasted hot dogs; for the steamers with the distinctively pure, slightly briny broth; for the meaty sweet taste of fresh lobster rolls. They come because, according to Madison's Mike Vandermaelen, a drummer with the Sin Sisters Band which, along with Johnny & the East Coast Rockers, are among the bands kicking off festivities this weekend: "There are some things everyone has to do in life at least once. And for me, one of them is eating a soft shell crab sandwich at Bill's."

They come for the ice-cold pitchers of beer, for outside bartender Wini Curry's incomparable mud slides and daiquiris and mint mojitos. They come because, as longtime patron Jack Philbin explained, "Bill's doesn't skimp on anything," from its drinks poured with a liberal hand to its ample portions.

They come because at least some know that Claffey has quietly earmarked whatever funds he might have used for advertising toward foundations

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When this photo was taken, in 1975, Bill's was a simple clam shack that sold fish 'n chips in cardboard cartons. You can still get the fried shore dinner platters.



Bill's Seafood in

Westbrook, a summer destination for folks for decades now, whether you eat inside or out, above. At right, fresh steamers and melted butter are as popular now as way back when. Photos Mara Lavitt.



# Bill's: From humble ice cream shack to local landmark

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seeking to find a cure for ovarian cancer, as well as to Team Avery, named for general manager Mark Leopoldino's young daughter, to enable further research on CDKLS, a genetic disorder diagnosed in only about 200 children worldwide.

They come because they appreciate Claffey's staunch belief that if his staff is well-trained, hard-working, and friendly, he'll reward them for it. He'll see them through tough times. He'll make college graduates proud to say working at Bill's is their career.

Take the amiable, mustachioed Dick Cooke, who's been tending bar at Bill's for, as he estimated, "forever" and who's seen "more characters per capita than anywhere I've been." Not to mention the straight-talking quick-witted Evelyn, who's waitressed at Bill's for about as long as Dick and has been known to guarantee that "if we don't have it, we'll get it for you."

They come for the same reason that Gary Greco regularly drives all the way from New Haven: because there's something

"healing" about being on an outdoor deck on the water on a soft summer evening with ducks placidly gliding along, something "rejuvenating" about listening to Dixieland jazz or a swing tune as the waves lap below. That's why he brings his 84-year-old father to Bill's: hearing live music cascading from a bandstand and watching people sing along and dance between the picnic tables "makes him happy," Greco said.

They come because Bill's is a place where someone in a wetsuit might sidle up to the bar and order takeout without eliciting a second glance; where a guy sporting tattoos nicely set off by his skin-tight tank top might banter with a well-heeled couple as naturally and easily as the Patchogue River commingles with the Long Island Sound under the Singing Bridge.

"A happy democracy," said Greco as he dug into his Russian oysters. "Doesn't matter whether you're young, old, rich, poor, celebrity, unknown - everyone's welcome." The former Celtics favorite and Old Saybrook native Vin Baker was



Bill's Seafood in Westbrook has been a summer destination for folks for decades now. Mara Lavitt photo.

a regular. The actor Harrison Ford has also stopped in.

They come because they remember the first time their parents took them, or their grandparents, or when they proudly introduced their out-of-state friends to Bill's as the classic New England clam shack. Or because they read that Connecticut Magazine had again recognized Bill's as the best

outdoor dining experience in the state.

They come because they're drawn by the simple recipe concocted over the years by Claffey - mix good food and reasonable prices with a casual, no-frills atmosphere and live entertainment most nights of the week; add a top-notch kitchen and wait staff; set it on a deck on a gentle river in one of the loveliest areas in

Connecticut; and you can't lose.

Be forewarned, however. Bill's follows a strict dress code; shoes are required. Some clothing is also recommended. As is cash. Except for the cutlery on the outdoor deck, no plastic is accepted, though there is an ATM near the entrance.

Otherwise, there are no rules. As it should be, according to Mark

Leopoldino. "It's summer," he said, as a seagull swooped and the Singing Bridge sang its low hum. "Everything goes."

That's why they come. Editor's Note: Bill's Seafood is located at the Singing Bridge, 548 Boston Post Road, Westbrook 06498. 860-399-7224. [www.billssedfood.com](http://www.billssedfood.com).