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# Water views and family tradition a Marnick’s specialty



By MEG BARONE  
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**F**aded black-and-white photographs on the wall of Marnick’s Restaurant and Rodeway Inn provide a glimpse into a past on Stratford’s shore that has changed little in nearly a century. The original bathing pavilion, built in 1915 near Long Island Sound’s edge on Washington Parkway in Lordship, is long gone, replaced by a more contemporary building that houses the restaurant and 28-room motel. But the ambience is like something out of the 1950s, a comforting slice of nostalgia that somehow survived the development boom along Fairfield County’s waterfront that began in the 1980s and continues today.

**focus on:**  
**MARNICK’S RESTAURANT & RODEWAY INN**

A weekly portrait of distinctive people, events and places around our region.

Many independent roadside restaurants and motels of the early to mid-20th century that once dotted beaches from Maine to Florida were razed and replaced with high-rise residential towers and chain hotels that block the public’s ocean view and separate vacationers from the ocean with thick plate-glass windows.

Marnick’s, which opened in January 1957 as Nick’s Hideaway, a luncheonette and ice cream fountain, has resisted the urge to go corporate. Three generations (with a fourth on the way) of the Quattone family have made sure it remained small and personal while still serving up great food to match the great view at Seawall Overlook.

“It’s quaint, a place from the 1950s that never outgrew that time period, said Kathryn Stroomer of Seymour, who’s been going to Marnick’s for decades. “They kept that charm. They kept that family environment, that intimacy. And the food was always good.”

Kathy Bernstein of Milford, who grew up in Stratford, said a visit to Marnick’s is “like coming to a different land.

“It’s not like Stratford. It’s like a vacation,”

## DID YOU KNOW?

About Marnick’s Restaurant and Rodeway Inn, 10 Washington Parkway in Stratford:

- Nick’s Hideaway opened in January 1957. The name was changed to Marnick’s in 1963.
- When the restaurant opened, a lobster roll cost \$1.70, hamburgers were 25 cents and soda was a nickel.
- Actress Bette Davis stayed at Marnick’s Motel after attending a play at the Shakespeare Theater in Stratford.
- People often assume the last name of the business owners is Marnick, but the name is a hybrid of the founders’ names, Margaret and Nicholas Quattone.
- Marnick’s employs 38 full- and part-time staff.
- Marnick’s once was cited in a *Connecticut Post* poll for serving the best lobster roll in the state. The restaurant Web site boasts having the world’s best lobster roll. What makes it so good? “Secrets,” Nick Jr. said.
- Marnick’s restaurant is open year-round, 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., except Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas.



she said. “And it’s one of the only places where you can stay on the shore. My husband surprised me for my 40th birthday with a room here. It’s like an oasis in the city.”

Bernstein said her mother, Peg Roman of Stratford, took her to Marnick’s from the time she was a child. “Part of the ambience is that you can eat right down on the shore. You can see the waves, the beach, boats on the water. You see sailboats go by,” she said.

Now Roman brings her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Marnick’s is a family affair, from the owners to the employees to the patrons.

Several former cooks and waitresses have married and still visit with their families. Some wait staff have a hard time leaving.

Waitress Eva O’Brien has worked at Marnick’s for 15 years. She greets customers as if they were family, kissing some as they arrive and leave.

“There are people who come here every day and have for 25 years. Two different couples come for dinner every night. It’s a good feeling, people coming back,” said Nicholas Quattone Sr., the originator of the business with his wife, Margaret. Before her death 13 years ago, Margaret Quattone was the backbone of the

business, he said.

She worked 16-hour days when the business opened while Nick Sr. worked as a truck driver. When Marnick’s — the name is a hybrid from the Quattones’ names, Margaret and Nick — got busy, Nick Sr. gave up driving and went to work full time at the restaurant.

“Mom and Dad both, they’d make everybody feel like family,” Nick Quattone Jr. said. “On Thanksgiving, any holiday really, they’d invite motel guests to have dinner with us if they didn’t have any place to go.”

Nick Sr., now 89, retired in 1979. Nick Jr., a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, and his son Nick III are holding up the family traditions, although they had to make one concession to corporate America this year.

“We were independent for 49 years. We just hooked up with Choice Hotels in December so we’re now a Rodeway Inn,” Nick Jr. said of the hotel affiliation.

A change in the business climate forced the Quattones to consider the collaboration with the hotel chain.

“In the ‘70s and ‘80s, we used to turn away 30 or 40 people a day from the motel. We were booked solid. Back in the ‘90s, things changed with the addition of so many motels off every exit of the highway. Then, I only got repeat customers who knew I was here,” Nick Jr. said. “Now with Rodeway and the Internet, people know we exist. I’m in touch with the outside world,” he said.

“I have to admit, I was a little old-fashioned. I had the old paper ledger. But you have to make changes. It was the right change, obviously,” said Nick Jr., who now has a computerized system for motel registrations.

“I should have done that years ago,” he said.

The motel was established in 1965 when the Quattone family moved from the three small rooms at the restaurant, where they had lived, to a home Nick Sr. purchased down the street.

“And every year or every other year we’d add another room; 1985 was the last time we added a room. That year I added nine rooms and doubled the size of the dining room in the restaurant,” Nick Jr. said.

“Years back we had Rockefeller and his wife as guests. We had seven rooms at that time and they took all of them for two days. They went to the Shakespeare Theater,” Nick Sr. said.

Some rooms have balconies overlooking the Sound. But even those that don’t are only steps from the beach.

It may not be four star by some standards, but the motel offers something few fancy beach resorts can — real proximity to the beach and a family atmosphere.

“It’s about people more than profits. That’s the feel I get from that place. It doesn’t have that slick corporate feel,” Stroomer said.

The Hardman family, from Muskegon, Mich., makes Marnick’s its home away from home every summer. “It’s a little unconventional living in a motel all summer, but we’re used to it. This is our fourth summer. The kids [ages 10, 7 and 5] look forward to it,” said Holly Hardman, whose husband, Bob, is a tennis pro who teaches in Greenwich each summer.

“We decided to rent here because we used to



live in Stratford and because it’s a quaint, family-oriented neighborhood. We’re here for an extended period of time so we want our kids to have a normal neighborhood experience,” Holly Hardman said. “The kids can go out and walk and bike and play and go to the beach. It’s not super touristy. And if I’m low on groceries I have the diner right there.”

When Nick’s Hideaway opened, it was really only a teenage hangout with five pinball machines and a jukebox.

“Eventually, the teenagers left and mom started cooking hot meals. She made lasagna. That was her big seller. And a Marnick’s grinder. It’s still on the menu,” Nick Jr. said.

“I remember Marnick’s when it was just a little counter, having a soda and a hamburger, hanging out with friends, roller skating practically next door and walking on the beach,” said Bill Mariotti, of Bradenton, Fla., during a recent return to Marnick’s for the first time in 40 years.

Today’s menu consists of everything from fresh seafood and pasta to steaks, salads, hotdogs, hamburgers, quesadillas, desserts and lots more — all homemade.

“I took their recipes and made them my own, but they’re basically the same,” said Nick III on the longtime family favorites.

Marnick’s has also become known for its lobster rolls.

In the early days, Nick Sr. would purchase one lobster at a time from Ocean Seafood and Fish Market in Bridgeport, only as customers requested it. Today, they can’t even guess how many lobsters they use over the course of a year. “Thousands,” Nick III said.

“The food is good, the service is good, the lobster roll is delicious, and so is the clam chowder,” Roman said.

Much as the Quattones love their work, there are disadvantages to having a small, family owned business. The work is endless and their success is tied to the whims of the public and the strength of the economy.

“In 20 years, we never took a vacation. We couldn’t afford it. It was just work, work, work,” Nick Sr. said.

“My first vacation was my honeymoon,” Nick Jr. said. “I still work seven days a week while he’s [Nick III] learning the business. I’m priming him to take over.”

Business, always slower in the winter, has declined a bit, Nick Jr. said. He plans to make changes to attract more customers.

“I’m going to try to get a permit for a deck for outdoor dining and we’re going to try to get a liquor permit. A lot of people ask if we have beer. When we say, ‘No,’ they leave,” Nick Jr. said.



Top: Directly on the beach and facing the Sound in Lordship, Marnick’s offers water views that are hard to come by. Above right: Nick Quattone III assembles a lobster roll, which came out on top in a Connecticut Post poll several years ago.

Left: Nick Quattone Jr. greets Bill Mariotti, a Bridgeport native living in Bradenton, Fla. He has returned to the restaurant for the first time in 40 years. Below, three generations of Quattones have kept Marnick’s alive since 1957.

PHOTOS BY BRIAN A. POUNDS

