

*Sept, '90*

# Annabelle's



After 35 years, Annabelle Robbins is ready to see some of the places around the world that her customers have been telling her about.

**IN 1954** A YOUNG WOMAN named Annabelle Robbins thought she'd try her hand at the restaurant business.

A graduate of Tufts University with degrees in biology and education, Robbins found herself more drawn to the world of business than academia. Having worked her way through school as bus girl, waitress, chief cook and bottle washer in a variety of college-town eateries, she was pretty darn sure just what business it should be. And since she had spent her earliest, happiest years with her grandparents, Clifford and Pansy Robbins in Southwest Harbor, she was also pretty darn sure where it would be.

Now, about 35 years later, Robbins is getting ready to hang up her apron. The Seawall Dining Room, simply called Annabelle's by those who have more than a passing acquaintance with the place, is on the market; and its owner says she is looking forward to enjoying, rather than serving, some of the fruits of her labors.

When the restaurant sells it will be the end of an era, for the people who made a weekly habit of dining at Annabelle's, for those who celebrated their happiest occasions in the big, brightly polished, pine-paneled main room, and for the legion of women and men (this writer included) who at one time or another earned their livelihoods there.



Nancy Lally has been making clam chowder and other house specialties at the Seawall Dining Room for 25 years.

Perched like some giant nesting duck at the edge of a marsh pond overlooking an impatient sea with a booming surf that occasionally carries out its threat to devour the narrow roadway, the place now is a lot more than it was several decades ago when Robbins purchased it.

## Untying the apron strings at a "backside" institution

Story and photos by Nan Lincoln

What she got was a ramshackle restaurant with room to seat 19, a rugged, unusual view and a handful of cold-water housekeeping cottages with outhouses. What she is selling is a hugely successful 225-seat dining room and lounge, a 20-unit motel with hot water and indoor plumbing included, and her own home.

"Perseverance and personality," Robbins says are the secrets of her success. "I never for one moment, from when I first started clearing and cutting those swamp alders, and started scraping together the wherewithal to expand to 27 seats, considered I couldn't make a go of it."

In those early years when she did all the cooking and her waitress Alice Robinson was her sole employee, everything she earned went right back into the restaurant. There wasn't much left over for advertising, so Robbins depended largely on word-of-mouth to spread the reputation that the Seawall Dining Room was a place where good, Yankee-style cooking and a cozy atmosphere could be found for a decent price.

And spread it did, thanks largely to the persuasive powers of her grandparents Clifford and Pansy Robbins, Annabelle's first, but by no means last, loyal customers.

"They came just about every night,"

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# Annabelle

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Robbins recalls. Then she laughs saying, "You know, I hadn't thought about this for years, but they always refused to sit down at one of the tables, in the beginning, in case I needed it for a customer. They always ate in the car."

Annabelle's became the favorite spot for local diners and eventually the summer crowd caught on. They found the rugged view, rustic ambience and simple fare worth a trip to the "backside" of the island.

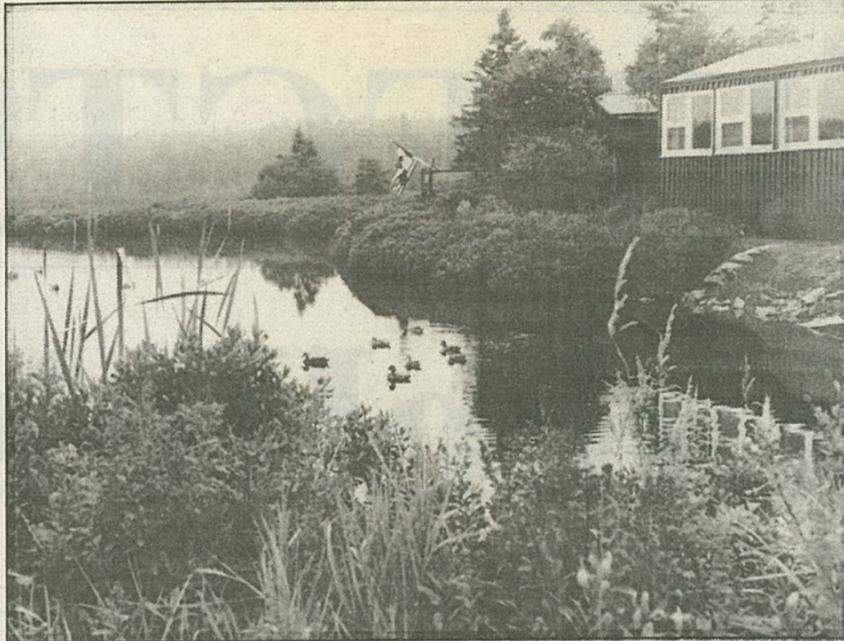
But, Robbins says, it may have been the service, as well as her menu that folks found irresistible. She and her staff have always made it a point to remember what little bit of attention will make her regular customers feel special.

New waitresses and waiters quickly get used to customers telling them "Oh, just to ask Annabelle, dear," when they arrive at a table to take an order.

Robbins even recalls buying a specially reinforced chair to accommodate one summer customer with a prodigious appetite and a girth to match.

"I was afraid our regular chairs wouldn't hold him," she explains with just a hint of amusement on her face.

Her customers haven't been the only ones who have kept



Hungry humans aren't the only regular customers at Annabelle's. A flock of wild mallard ducks makes the Seawall marsh pond their summer home.

coming back. Robbins, despite running a tight, hard-working ship has also had a knack for holding onto her crew. Alice Robinson stayed on for 25 years, and passed on her duties to her daughter. Nancy Lally has also been there for 25 years and Rita Johnson, who runs the motel, joined Robbins in 1976. Her Aunt Evelyn Robbins came on as hostess/bookkeeper in 1968 after she retired from schoolteaching and continued helping out until just a few months before her death this winter, at age 89.

Scores of others got their first jobs at Annabelle's, left to get married, often throwing their

receptions at the restaurant, and came back when their children were old enough. There's even a saying around the backside, that if you need a job, go to Annabelle, she's bound to hire you. She now employs a total of 38 people, 17 of them year-round.

"It's been a big extended family," Robbins says. "We've shared marriages, babies, divorces, deaths, college diplomas, anger, tears and laughter — sometimes three generations worth of it."

Annabelle has also made time to be a mover and shaker in her community. She has spearheaded the local Chamber of Commerce, served on the Board of Selectmen

for at least a dozen years and volunteered for a number of state and local committees.

Robbins admits that occasionally she has to drop some of the many balls she's chosen to juggle. She recalls how frustrating it was recently when an unexpected busload of tourists arrived at the restaurant, the same night as a special town meeting. A village park improvement project she had been working on for more than a year was defeated that night by only two votes.

"I know my being there might have changed the outcome," she says ruefully. "But what could I do, I couldn't leave my crew with all those people."

Despite such conflicts, Robbins says she's going to miss it all dreadfully when the restaurant eventually sells.

"How could I not?" she asks. "I've turned over every rock around this place, at least once, if not twice."

Still, she has no doubts that the time has come to let it all go. She plans to move to Bucksport where she has bought a home.

"I want to enjoy some of the other things I've been putting off all these years, see some of the wonderful sounding places my customers have been telling me about."

Considering the success of her last dream 35 years ago, it seems pretty sure that Annabelle Robbins will have exactly the sort of retirement she plans for herself.

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