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The forgotten racial history of Red Lobster

By Nathaniel Meyersohn, CNN

5 minute read · Updated 2:41 PM EDT, Sat June 8, 2024

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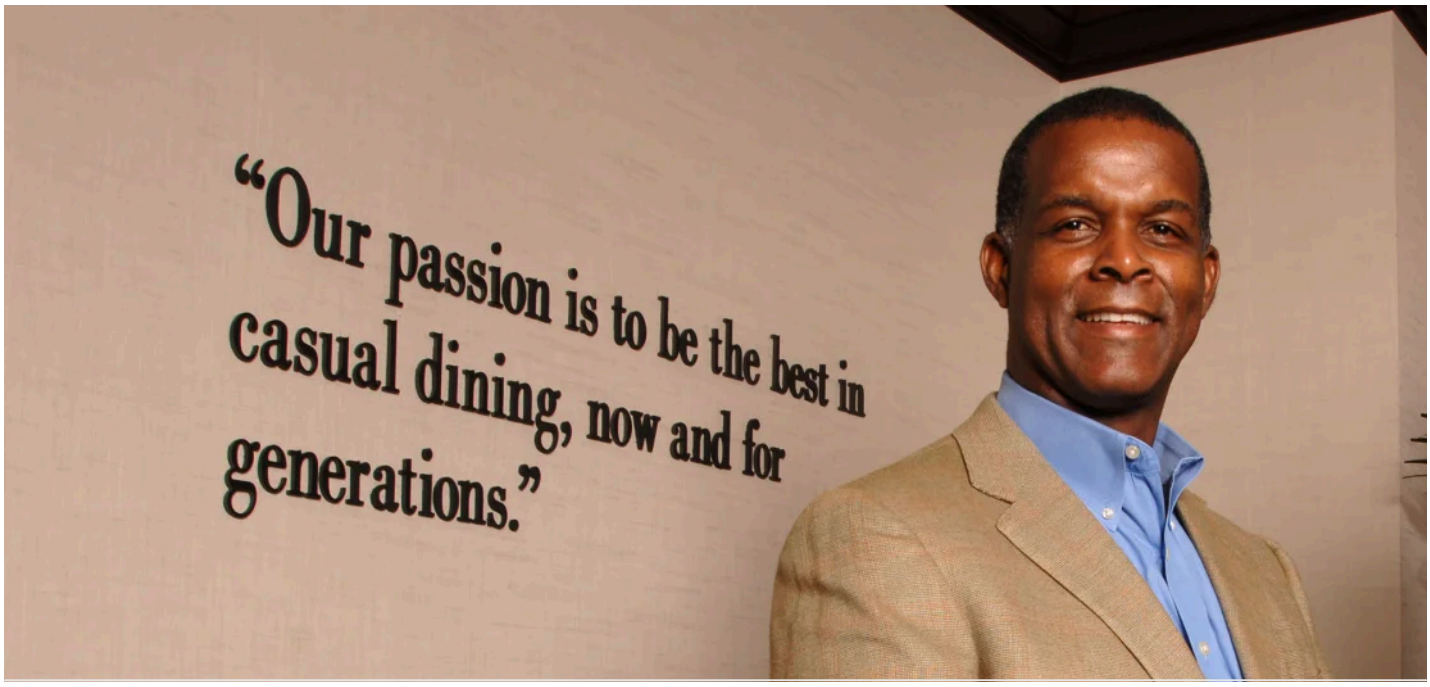
New York (CNN) — Communities around the country are losing cheddar bay biscuits and all-you-can-eat seafood deals as troubled Red Lobster closes around 100 US restaurants, with up to 135 more closures looming.

But Red Lobster's decline is particularly a loss for many Black diners, who formed a loyal base for the brand and still account for a higher share of customers than other major casual chain restaurants, according to historians, customers and former Red Lobster executives.

"Red Lobster cultivated Black customers. It has not shied away from that customer base like some brands have," Clarence Otis Jr., the former CEO of Darden Restaurants from 2004 to 2014, when the company still owned the chain, told CNN.

After Otis became CEO, Sacramento Observer columnist Mardeio Cannon wrote that "it is only fitting" Red Lobster had a Black CEO because "if there is any restaurant in America that most African Americans love, it's Red Lobster."



Clarence Otis Jr., the former CEO of Darden Restaurants. Phelan M. Ebenhack/AP

In a 2015 presentation to investors, Red Lobster said 16% of customers were Black, two percentage points higher than the Black share of the US population. Red Lobster did not respond to CNN's request for comment on current customer demographics.

The chain hired Black workers and served Black guests from its beginnings in the South in the late 1960s, and Black celebrities such as Chris Rock and Nicki Minaj worked there before they became famous. (Minaj later joked about being fired from "all three or four" of the Red Lobsters where she worked over "Lobsterita" drinks and cheddar bay biscuits with Jimmy Fallon.) And Beyoncé sang about taking a romantic partner to Red Lobster in her 2016 song "Formation," which addresses police brutality, Hurricane Katrina and Black culture in America.

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Red Lobster attracted both working-class and affluent Black diners during the 1970s and 1980s at a time when many sit-down restaurants were unwelcoming of Black patrons, said Marcia Chatelain, a professor of Africana studies at the University of Pennsylvania and author of "Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America," which explores the relationship between McDonald's and Black consumers.

Red Lobster's early locations near shopping malls also helped it grow with Black customers, she said.

"The placement of Red Lobster outlets near shopping malls coincided with the opening of more retail options for African Americans after the Civil Rights Act of 1964," she said in an email. "This style of restaurant was appealing to people seeking a fine dining-like experience without dealing with the uncertainty of how they would be treated at local businesses."

Civil rights mythology

Founded by Bill Darden, Red Lobster was racially integrated when it opened in 1968 in Lakeland, Florida.

Hiring and serving Black people was not a revolutionary step by Darden, and he certainly was far from the first to leap at the opportunity. But it was another marker of racial progress for Black people in Lakeland and the changing South. In Lakeland during the early 1960s, local civil rights activists picketed businesses and movie theaters that denied entry to Black patrons, forcing them to integrate.

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Although Red Lobster's opening came four years after passage of the Civil Rights Act mandating desegregation of public accommodations, many schools and businesses still were segregated. Some closed rather than integrate.

Red Lobster was "always very open and receptive to us," said Beverly Boatwright, who was active in the sit-in movement in Lakeland while attending the all-Black high school, along with her mother, a leader in the local branch of the NAACP. "We never had a problem at Red Lobster. There were other places where we did have struggles" in the city.

But Red Lobster was not immediately a popular spot with Black customers in Lakeland, and the mythology of Darden as a civil rights pioneer that has grown in recent years has been overstated.

Red Lobster was not a "place we frequented a whole lot" in its early days, said Harold Dwight, who graduated two years after Boatwright in 1968. Most Black residents did not have the means to go out to eat, Dwight said. When they did, they went to establishments run by Black owners and Morrison's Cafeteria, the largest cafeteria chain in the South, which had been integrated for several years and had more Black employees.

The Green Frog restaurant in Waycross, Georgia, in 1961. From Okefenokee Regional Library System

In corporate lore, Darden's first restaurant, the Green Frog —which opened in 1938 in Waycross, Georgia — was desegregated. Darden has been lauded in various articles as a "social crusader" "who [stood] up

to Jim Crow" in "defiance" of segregation laws. On Darden Restaurants' corporate website, the company mentions the Green Frog and says its founder "welcomed all guests to his tables."

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But the Green Frog did not welcome Black diners initially, according to Black people who grew up in Waycross and recall the Green Frog, which closed in the 1980s.

John Fluker, a former mayor of Waycross, said Black people worked in the kitchen, but the Green Frog did not welcome Black customers.

The Green Frog reflected the racial norms of the time in south Georgia, said Waycross resident Horace Thomas.

"They didn't open the doors for Black people," he said. "Everybody was like that."

Cultural appeal

Although Black customers did not immediately frequent Red Lobster, the chain gradually built strength with Black patrons as it expanded in the South and across the country.

Red Lobster developed a reputation for being friendly and open to Black customers, in part because it had Black staff when a new restaurant opened, and it later developed marketing strategies to court Black diners, say historians and former executives.

"They've been loyal to us and we've been loyal to them," Beverly Boatwright said. "We went there because the food was delicious. It was the only place you could get good seafood. It was a luxury."

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Red Lobster developed a reputation of being welcoming to Black customers. Michael

Red Lobster developed a reputation of being welcoming to Black customers. Michael Nagle/Bloomberg/Getty Images

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Red Lobster's cuisine was also a major part of its popularity with Black diners.

Outdoor fish fries with catfish, crawfish and other seafood have served as a popular tradition in Black communities, said Robyn Autry, a sociology professor at Wesleyan University who studies race and wrote recently on how Red Lobster's downfall "hits differently" for Black communities.

Red Lobster brought the "outdoor fried fish experience" indoors, Autry said. For many Black people, it became a "marker of status to move from outdoor fish fries to sitting down with menus and being served."

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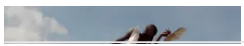
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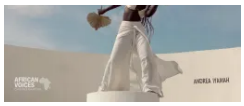

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