Freeman professor’s seafood shack shakes up NOLA food scene

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In 2023, Freeman professor Chris Otten and co-owner Mary Nell Bennett launched the Nell Shell, a seafood pop-up that specializes in New England-style lobster rolls.

New Orleans is known for its iconic seafood dishes. Boiled crawfish. Shrimp po’boys. Charbroiled oysters. Softshell crabs. Gumbo.

Lobster rolls usually don’t make that list, but Chris Otten (BSM ’05) is hoping to change that.

Otten, professor of practice in business and legal studies, is co-owner of the Nell Shell, a seafood pop-up that’s bringing the beloved New England delicacy to

Crescent City eaters.

“At first we thought we might sell 500 lobster rolls in a season,” Otten says. “We ended up selling almost 3,000 our first season.”

Otten launched the restaurant in 2023 with Mary Nell Bennett, whom he met while the two were in law school. “She and I had been talking about opening a restaurant together,” Otten says. “The summer of 2023 she called me and said, ‘I need to ask you a question. Promise you won’t hang up.’”

Bennett told him she had just signed a lease for a restaurant space in the Garden District and wanted Otten to be involved. Otten, who had previous experience as a waiter and bartender, took the leap, and the Nell Shell was born.

Occupying the site of Imperial Woodpecker Sno-Balls during its offseason from November to March, the Nell Shell has a grab-and-go menu and picnic tables that make it a draw for nearby workers looking to snag a quick lunch.

“We’ve got a really loyal local following,” he says. “And tourists also ply this part of Magazine Street, so they make up a big part of our business.”

The restaurant’s menu shouldn’t be wholly unfamiliar to fans of New Orleans cuisine. With a lobster-stuffed buttered brioche bun, the lobster roll might be considered a cousin to the po’boy — albeit one that comes in two varieties. The Maine style features chilled lobster dressed in mayonnaise, lemon and chives, while the Connecticut style showcases butter-poached lobster with lemon and chives. In addition to rolls, the Nell Shell also offers corn and crab bisque, shrimp and orzo salad, and house-smoked tuna dip.



The Nell Shell’s Maine style lobster roll features chilled lobster dressed in mayonnaise, lemon and chives.

Lobster rolls make for a luscious treat, but Otten says sourcing fresh lobster meat consistently can be difficult.

“The biggest challenge we face involves the logistics of flying in fresh seafood,” Otten says. “We fly our lobster in fresh. Trying to anticipate the supply and demand is a sophisticated guessing game.”

It’s all part of an evolving business strategy that Otten says can be both tactical and fun.

“We joke that my official title is the CMO — the Chief Merch Officer,” Otten laughs. “We try to come up with some punchy, cheeky merchandise, which is a big part of running a successful business.”

Since its opening, the Nell Shell has developed a strong social media presence, with influencers regularly scouting out the spot and posting online reviews. “Word of mouth marketing has been our bread and butter since we started,” Otten says. “There’s no better advertising than having someone wear one of our lobster hoodies.

“The coolest thing is going around the Mardi Gras parade route and seeing people I don’t know wearing our merch,” he adds. “Seeing this brand get established has been a truly wonderful experience.”

In addition to successful marketing tactics, Otten’s Freeman connections have been beneficial for business, providing both a ready workforce and new strategy insights.

“Without Tulane, we probably would not be properly staffing our business,” Otten says. “We tried various ways of finding employees, but one day I just made an open call in class. We ended up hiring a bunch of Tulane students. They work with us in the Nell Shell’s physical location and when we do pop-ups around town.”

Otten brings a strong legal background and industry experience to the Nell Shell, but he says his PMBA coursework has also helped him to become better attuned to the business’s pricing and strategic positioning in the market.

“I’m taking my MBA at the Freeman School right now, and there are a lot of things we’re learning in class that I’m applying to the business,” he says. “I’m thinking more about how we place ourselves in the market and what kind of customers we’re trying to attract. We’ve also become more confident about focusing on our particular strengths and not expanding outside of that.”

The Nell Shell ends its seasonal residency at Imperial Woodpecker on Feb. 28, but lobster fans needn’t fret. Soon, the Nell Shell food truck will be back doing pop-ups events for the spring and summer.

“We’ve got a really good product that people like,” Otten says. “I meet people all the time who say, “Wait, you’re behind the Nell Shell? I love that place!’ The local response has just been the best.”