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Lobster Pioneers of Western Australia

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Giacomo Camarda circa 1965.

James Paratore (left) with his dad Joe.

Pioneers behind rich history and promising future

At 81 years old Giacomo Camarda has pulled more lobster pots than most in his 70 years' experience in an industry that is the lifeblood of many families and communities dotted along the Western Australian coast.

As the third of five generations of a Fremantle fishing family, Giacomo is one of many pioneers who have made the Western Rock Lobster industry the thriving enterprise it is today.

For Giacomo it began when, aged 11 with a shock of black hair and adventure in his heart, he started going out on his brother-in-law's 45-foot, jarrah-build boat called the Cinderella every Christmas holidays.

Seven decades later, Giacomo now gets to see his grandson James board the family's Neptune III, continuing a tradition and livelihood the Camarda family started more than a century ago.

"Lobster fishing used to be a lot harder back in my day," Giacomo said. "We would use landmarks and through trial and error we would find a spot.

"With technology it's a lot easier to fish these days."

Fedele Camarda, Neptune III skipper and Giacomo's son, has witnessed many changes in the industry aside from technology advancements, including the introduction in 2010 of the lobster quota system and the back-of-boat sales last year.

Fedele said the public had fully embraced back-of-boat sales, relishing the opportunity to buy fresh produce straight from the people who caught it.

"The community has responded really well," he said. "People come down to meet and chat with us, and get to see us as the people we really are."

Dongara fisherman George Bass is another with a long history of fishing for the enticing rock lobster. As a young lad of 14, he started lobster fishing with his father Clive in the 1960s around Dongara and the Abrolhos Islands.

"In the very early days, you would start at 2am," he said. "You'd go fishing and get back in as late as 6pm. Then you would do your maintenance because your equipment wasn't that crash-hot in those days, so there were always repairs to do.

"You would have a bite to eat and try and get a bit of sleep, and back out to sea again the next day. We slept in tents on the beach and our showers were a bit of Seasol soap, jump into the ocean and have a wash."

The coastal town of Cervantes is home to the Thompson family who have been fishing local waters for 55 years. Headed by David "Dogga" Thompson Senior, three generations are involved in a business that has evolved into processing, export and tourism and is one of the largest employers in the region.

Despite the juggernaut that is now the family business, Dogga doesn't forget its beginnings – in 1966, fishing out of Grey Island, a coastal shack settlement 200km north of Perth.

No doubt, the favourite family recipe stems back to those simpler times – grilled lobster on the barbecue in a garlic butter – simple but delicious.

Dr James Paratore, from another Fremantle pioneering family, couldn't agree more when it comes to cooking lobster, "the less you do, the more".

And he should know – James comes from a long line of fishermen, his father Joe dropping pots off Ledge Point with his uncle in the 1960s.

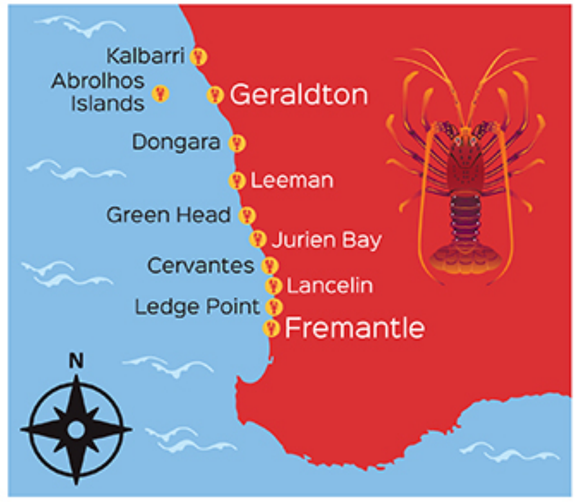
While James spends most of his days as a practicing doctor, fishing is in his blood and time spent on the open water with his dad, watching the dawn break in the silence of morning just like his ancestors, is a way of life that will continue for him, many other lobster fishermen and generations to follow.

"Our story is not unique; it mirrors the trials and tribulations of many migrant families," James said.

"But this is a story that epitomises the values we hold as a small family business rolling with the waves, with the tides of failure and success, with a keen eye on that horizon for the next place we are destined to see."

"This is a story that epitomises the values we hold as a small family business rolling with the waves, with the tides of failure and success, with a keen eye on that horizon for the next place we are destined to see."

Rock lobster communities stretch along the coast



The western rock lobster is a true emblem of Western Australia; the premium salty sweet delicacy unmatched in the seafood world. As a temperate species, western rock lobsters are found only on the continental shelf off the coast of WA, with most inhabiting the waters between Fremantle and Kalbarri, supporting vibrant fishing communities.

KALBARRI

Ian Ralph has been fishing around Kalbarri since he was 16, following in the footsteps of his grandfather.

"I learned just about everything from my family," he said. "The best times of the year to fish, where to go, certain spots to fish and favourable weather conditions."

Mr Ralph's primary fishing ground is around the Zuytdorp Cliffs, north of Kalbarri.

"I enjoy the ruggedness of the coastline and the remoteness," he said. "It really helps you enjoy the experience."

GERALDTON

Born and bred in the Mid West, Peter Bailey is well accustomed to its waters, having fished there for more than 34 years. Over the decades a lot has changed.

"My grandfather was a roo shooter and a prospector out and around the Cue area, and when things got tough and the local mine closed up, he moved to Dongara," he said. "He was one of the first fishermen there.

"He had more of a dinghy with an outboard; things were primitive. Now the investment is higher, the boats are better and there's 12 months to a season."

ABROLHOS ISLANDS

Jane Liddon has lived on the low-lying Abrolhos Islands with her family since the 1950s. She said many things had changed in the way the family fished, but a lot had also stayed the same.

"My father introduced jet boats, so we fish in the breakers, using the jet boats in shallow water," she said.

"It's not exactly the same as a big boat – we haven't got all the electronic aids. It's all in our heads as to where to put our pots, based on weather, tides and times of the moon."

Despite its premium status, Ms Liddon said lobster was more accessible than many people realised.

"The thing about WA is we've always had a good and healthy recreational fishery," she said. "Being near the coast, you probably know somebody with a dingy and a few pots, so there's a fair chance they're going to give you a couple of lobsters for Christmas."

DONGARA

George Bass has been lobster fishing around Dongara since 1962, back when a good catch at the start of the week meant you could take it easy for the remainder, though the Bass family always fished on regardless.

"Dongara/Port Denison was one of the first ports north of Fremantle established to ship wheat and wool," he said. "It then became a major fishing port with its own export and processing facilities."

According to Mr Bass, Dongara fishermen played a major role in rescue operations before marine sea and search operations were established.

"Prior to the establishment of the Port Denison Volunteer Sea Search & Rescue group, local fishermen were involved in rescues up and down the coast," he said. "To this day the industry is still called upon for assistance in such situations."

Abi Thompson.

CERVANTES

Abi Thompson and her family have been in the lobster fishing business in Cervantes since 1966.

Their factory processes 840,000kg of lobster per year, ready for export.

"There have been large upturns over the last 50 years," Ms Thompson said. "What was once a domestic market producing very low volumes is now a live market value-adding product to many different buyers in the world."

FREMANTLE

Fedele Camarda's family has been lobster fishing in Fremantle's waters since the late 1800s. In the 1940s, his grandfather's boat was the last to get a motor and winch.

"They used to sail out from Fremantle to mainly fish the inner reefs and the Five Fathom Bank and pull by hand," he said.

Mr Camarda's first year fishing in Fremantle was during the America's Cup of 1986/87.

"We fish between Rottnest and Mandurah, anywhere from the Five Fathom Bank out to the deeper bottom," he said.

Multicultural heritage a solid foundation for generations

Much of the rich history attached to Western Australia's rock lobster industry finds roots in overseas influence – immigrants who came from Europe in the early to mid-1900s and poured their hearts into what would become a booming commercial fishing industry steeped in multicultural tradition.

The lobster fishermen of the Sicilian Paratore family began fishing off Fremantle in the 1960s.

"We originate from a long line of artisan fishermen and fisherwomen over many centuries who originally fished off the northern coast of Sicily, in the waters around Tindari near Messina," James, current skipper and fourth generation fisherman, said.

Working as a GP, James Paratore is still up before dawn on some mornings to fish and, along with his sister Vanessa, is keen to continue a rich family tradition started by his father Joe.

"Dad lived in a caravan with his uncle, auntie and their four kids," James said. "He was an 18-year-old man sent from Sicily to WA to put his only known trade – fishing – to good use."

It was a tough start for home-sick Joe, who experienced some meagre seasons in those early years, but he would not be deterred.

"Dad rolled up his sleeves and got to work," James said. "With encouragement from mum and night school to learn English, he got his skipper's ticket and eventually bought his first plywood boat in 1981."

A 38-foot boat officially named 'Blue Seas', Joe's crew called the vessel 'Splinter' for its compact size.

Fellow lobster fishing family the Camardas also originated from Sicily; five generations of fishermen stretching back to 1989 when the first generation fished out of Cockburn Sound.

Today, Giacomo Camarda, his two sons Fedele and Joe and grandson James take their boat out three to four times a week, a fond reflection of the past when Giacomo, who quit school at age 14 to work as a fisherman, toiled alongside his father and three brothers.

For Fedele, it's a case of different generation, same family 'all hands on deck' approach.

"I'm skippering the boat, my brother Joe works on the deck with my son James and mum does the book work," he said.

"Dad still comes out with us, he has a wealth of knowledge which is always helpful."

of WA fishers

Further up the coast of WA, there is also some English tradition in the WA lobster fishing industry, especially around the Abrolhos Islands, where Jane Liddon's family moved from England when she was five.

"My Aunty Muriel 'Moo' worked with my dad then," she said. "They were catching lobster in Dover and moving boats around from Holland to England and catching fish.

"Moo saw an ad in the paper asking for fisherman to come to Australia, in particular the Abrolhos Islands, and in return they'd give them a house and a boat."

The move, in the end, would prove prosperous and see the Liddons lay deep roots.

"We've all lived on Post Office Island," Jane said. "I now live in what was my dad's hut. All of the people who are dead in our family are now ashes in the lagoon. It's very much our home."

Jane Liddon.

Fedele Camarda.

DID YOU KNOW?

Living off large stretches of WA's coast, saltwater-loving western rock lobsters are different to crayfish, which are found in freshwater lakes, rivers, streams and ponds.

1829
Fishing is one of the first commercial trades established following European settlement of the Swan River Colony of Western Australia.

1890s
With an increase in fishermen and the number of boats, Parliament decides to create a Department of Fisheries to better manage the industry.

1899-1900
Compulsory licensing of fishermen and their boats is introduced in 1899. The following year 191 licensed boats and 401 fishermen are operating in the state's fishing industry.

1948
Fremantle's Italian community celebrates the first 'Blessing of the Fleet', a spiritual tradition brought over to WA from Mediterranean fishing communities to ensure a safe and successful fishing season.

1949-51
A small group of Geraldton fishermen floats the idea of a northern fisherman's co-operative, aimed at deregulating the lobster industry controlled by factory owners.

1954-55
Research leads to the establishment of a new Asian market. Early trials of whole-cooked lobster are sent to Singapore and Japan.

1960s
The first lobster restrictions are introduced, limiting the number of pots lobster fishermen can have. What follows is research backed up by scientists who check the catch totals and find new ways to control the numbers caught to keep lobster fishing sustainable.

2000
The Western Rock Lobster Fishery becomes the first in the world to achieve independent third-party certification as a sustainably managed fishery by the London-based Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

2010
The lobster quota system is introduced.

2017
Local lobster trial commences for fisher direct local sales.

2020
Introduction of back-of-boat sales to increase availability and accessibility of WA lobster locally.

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Back-of-boat sales have reconnected the community with local lobster fishers.

Fresh off the boat

Opening the floodgates for lobster fishers to reconnect with the local community, a recent change brought back a tradition which had not been seen for a decade.

Reintroduced during the springtime of 2020 as the flowers blossomed and the rains eased, the return of back-of-boat sales saw lobster fishermen expressing their joy at being able to meet their customers directly and supply them with delicious lobster straight from the sea.

"It's been great – everyone has responded really well and people are meeting us and get to see us as the people we really are," Fremantle lobster fisher Fedele Camarda said.

A collaborative effort between government and industry, the change meant an easing of previous restrictions that constrained fishers to sell directly to the community.

Coastal resort towns such as Kalbarri have benefited from back-of-boat sales, with tourists regularly taking advantage, according to local fisherman Robbie Glass.

"It's a great thing for small coastal towns like Lancelin and Kalbarri and makes it easier to deliver directly to customers," he said. "It's a great experience for families who come and start a conversation and seem really interested with the industry."

Fremantle lobster fisherman James Paratore was similarly pleased with the return of the tradition.

"It was welcome news to learn we could engage with the domestic market in a way which occurred many years ago, and a way which brings us closer to our European cousins who are revered as local fishermen close to their communities," he said.

"Back-of-boat sales have helped us reach out and meet our customer base at a local level.

"Learning people's first names and preferences, and their own unique stories of what it means to access fresh, locally caught, sustainable seafood has been a privilege.

"We are returning to our roots and engaging once again with the local community – the way it should always be."

It seems many other lobster fishers feel the same way, selling their catches up and down the coast at Port Coogee, Hillarys, Mindarie and Lancelin, to name just a few.

James said careful management of a sustainable fishery had ensured all parties could benefit from a plentiful supply of fresh rock lobster for years to come.

"Lobsters have never been so accessible, whether by the abundance of stock created by conservative catch limits which benefits the recreational experience, or by the new back-of-boat sales mechanism," he said.

"We are returning to our roots and engaging once again with the local community – the way it should always be."

Joe Paratore selling lobsters from the back of the Vanessa-James at Port Coogee Marina.

Following in their ancestors' footsteps

Joe and Maria Paratore with son James (right), his wife Ana Sivak (left) and their daughter Aria.

The Paratore family's connection with the sea runs deep.

Joe Paratore was 18 years old when he arrived in Western Australia from Sicily in the 1960s to put his only known trade – fishing – to good use.

"The idea was to make some money and send it back home to his family in Sicily," Joe's son James said.

"But by the end of the first season, a fairly poor one by usual standards, he wasn't sure this lobster industry was all it had been hyped up to be. He was homesick and keen to return to Italy."

Initially living in a cramped caravan with his uncle, auntie and their four kids, Joe's reluctance to stay in WA was perhaps understandable, but, evidently, a fisherman's patience runs strong in his veins.

Joe began fishing at Ledge Point with his uncle Carmelo Barresi at a time when many of WA's regional fishing towns constituted a rag-tag collection of beach shacks and shantys.

James said his father still told the story of just how tough things first were.

"On special occasions in Sicily he could afford a mortadella roll," James said. "The mortadella was so thinly sliced it was more the aroma than the taste that he enjoyed.

"When he got here, he was dining on bread with oranges... so much for the mortadella! And so much for Australia being the 'land of riches'."

As the years moved on, however, Joe rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

"With encouragement from mum and after attending night school to learn English, he got his skipper's ticket and eventually bought his first plywood boat in 1981," James said,

"It was a 38-foot boat called Blue Seas – or Splinter as his crew Terry Melbourne liked to call it, given its compact size.

"But it got them home safely every day, some days from as far away as Bunbury."

In 1995 Joe built a new boat and named it after his children – the Vanessa James.

"The seasons marched on, some good and some not so great, but we always had food on the table," James said.

"My sister Vanessa and I both now help out in our own way and our partners and children are also involved in the business."

James juggles his roles as fisherman and doctor, but has kept a familiar routine – rising before dawn most mornings to fish for lobster with Joe.

"The two jobs are very different," he explained.

"One in the confines of a medical centre, the other 20 miles off the coast of Fremantle, just south of Rottnest, greeting the morning sun with the sweet sounds of the ocean around us.

"When we're out on the boat the worries of the world are behind us and it's just dad and I doing what our ancestors have done for generations."

James said it was paramount to him that the tradition continued.

"Fishing is a way of life," he said. "There are less fishermen these days and I want it to continue.

"I want others to learn how to harvest the freshest, highest-quality seafood and provide it direct to the community."

Blue Seas 1987.

Joe's peasant-style lobster

INGREDIENTS

- 1 onion, chopped
- Olive oil
- 500g peas
- 5 potatoes, diced
- 3 lobsters
- 400g tin peeled, diced tomatoes
- 500g small shell pasta
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Handful of parmesan or pecorino cheese
- Fresh bread, to serve

DIRECTIONS

1. Soften a whole chopped white onion in a decent amount of olive oil over a medium heat.
2. Add the peas, potatoes and tin of tomatoes, then add the meat of three lobsters.
3. Add some water to cover and simmer for 30 minutes.
4. Prepare some pasta in salted water.
5. Drain pasta and add to the stew before seasoning with salt and pepper.
6. Add parmesan or pecorino cheese and use fresh bread to "mop up the plate".

In the next instalment of Lobster Pioneers of WA, we look at the fishing community of Cervantes, 200km north of Perth, as well as the industry's sustainability initiatives. Only in the August 8 edition of The Sunday Times.

(L-R): Joe Camarda, his dad Giacomo, his brother Fedele and Fedele's son James.

Giacomo Camarda (right) with his brother Frank circa 1965.

Fremantle stalwarts

Giacomo Camarda was 11 years old when he started to fish, leaving school just three years later and heading to sea alongside his father and three brothers on the 45-foot Cinderella.

It was a life Giacomo seemed destined for, following in the footsteps of two previous generations of Sicilian fishermen living in Western Australia.

The Camardas lived on Norfolk Street at the time, within spitting distance of Fremantle Fishing Boat Harbour, where they would set off from early in the morning to cast their pots.

Fast forward to 2021 and you can find Giacomo still fishing three to four times a week with his two sons Fedele and Joe, and grandson James.

To date, five generations of Camardas have joined the family business, proudly tracing their Western Australian heritage back to Giacomo's grandfather who arrived in 1898, just as the State Government began issuing compulsory licences to the growing number fishermen.

"Lobster fishing used to be a lot harder," Giacomo said.

"My father told me in the 1940s his boat was the last to get a motor and a winch.

"They used to sail out from Fremantle to mainly fish the inner reefs, and had to pull by hand.

"I still remember how we would use landmarks and, through trial and error, find the better fishing grounds.

"Now with technology it's a lot easier. But I still enjoy going out there each morning, especially with my sons and grandson on board."

After 18 years spent fishing off the Cinderella, in 1971 Giacomo bought his own boat.

Five years later the family first built the Neptune II and the Neptune III in 1993, which the family still uses.

Slightly later to the party than his dad – a fact perhaps representative of the changing times – the eldest of Giacomo's sons, Fedele, was 18 years old when he joined his father on the Neptune II against the backdrop of the America's Cup in the late 80s.

"I remember struggling the first year that I fished; it was hard and I wasn't used to it and I thought, 'that's it, I'm done'," he said.

Fedele began a teaching degree at Murdoch, but by the time the next summer came around, Giacomo had him back on the boat and it was a different story.

Fedele saw his teaching degree out whilst fishing in the summers and ended up staying aboard the boat and teaching in the off-seasons.

"I'm skippering the boat, my brother Joe works on the deck with my son James and mum does the book work," he said.

"Dad still comes out with us; he has a wealth of knowledge which is always helpful."

"I still remember how we would use landmarks and, through trial and error, we would find the better fishing grounds."

Fedele's lobster marinara

INGREDIENTS

- 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1 onion, chopped
- 4-5 garlic cloves, finely sliced
- 4 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped
- 6 lobster tails, fresh or thawed
- 2 fresh tomatoes, chopped
- 3 tablespoons fresh basil, chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat olive oil in a large saucepan over medium heat.
2. Cook and stir onion and garlic in hot oil until lightly browned.
3. Stir lobster tails into onion and garlic. Cook until shells turn bright red, 10 to 15 minutes.
4. Add tomatoes, basil, salt and black pepper to lobster tails. Simmer over low heat for 45 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Remove lobster meat from shells and stir into sauce with fresh parsley. Alternatively, you could serve lobster pieces separately.
6. Ingredients can be modified according to individual taste.

Blessed is he who fishes

An age-old tradition borne from Italy's southern fishing town of Molfetta – the annual blessing of the fleet has been passed down by generations of Italian families keen to offer their prayers and well-wishes for a successful season at sea.

So important is the tradition that its reach has over the years extended to the other side of the world, riding the waves of migration to sister city Fremantle on the backs of generations of Italian seafarers.

John Minutillo's family traces their origins back to Molfetta and is proud to continue honouring their heritage here in Western Australia.

President of the Fishing Fleet Festival Association, John said Fremantle's event had evolved in size and stature since its humble beginnings in 1948.

"It was started up by a bunch of fishermen in Fremantle who were back from their hometown of Molfetta," he said. "They had the tradition going back home so they decided to bring it to Fremantle."

The blessing runs on the second last Sunday of October ahead of the fishing season, with a large procession of fishermen of all cultural backgrounds and members of the community walking from St Patrick's Basilica down to Fremantle Fishing Boat Harbour – each community commonly carrying traditional banners or symbolic objects.

For the Molfettese community, this object is a statue of the Madonna of the Martyrs, or Madonna dei Martiri.

"The first year they had no procession or anything, and then in the second year they started the procession and brought the Madonna dei Martiri statue out – the same as the major statue that they use in Molfetta," Mr Minutillo said.

In the following years, the prominent Sicilian community in Fremantle, many members of which trace their roots to the city of Capo d'Orlando on the island's north coast, also jumped on board with the tradition, bringing their own holy statue to the ceremony – La Madonna di Capo d'Orlando.

"About three years after the first blessing, the Sicilian community got involved and they brought their own statue," Mr Minutillo said.

"They put the statues on a boat and the boat goes around the fishing harbour.

"The Archbishop will then bless the fleet in the afternoon, which gives the fishermen protection on the ocean and valuable catches throughout the fishing season."

Mr Minutillo said the Portuguese community joined in traditions around 15 to 20 years later and had a large presence in today's festival, along with many other cultures.

"Every nationality comes out to watch the parade, and the streets are normally pretty full," he said.

Drawing spectators from all over Perth, Mr Minutillo said this year marked the 73rd anniversary of the blessing, with the event's long-lived success owing to its rich tapestry of cultural input, making it a lively, passion-filled day for fishermen and the public alike.

"We have associations that come and join the procession from all over Perth," he said. "Everybody knows about it and they all bring their own little banners and get involved."

Estimating some 10,000 to 20,000 people lined the stretch from St. Patrick's Basilica down to the harbour to see the procession these days, Mr Minutillo said Fremantle's blessing of the fleet was likely the world's biggest outside Italy.

"There's a lot of tradition here and hopefully we keep on going for a lot longer," he said.

Blessing the fleet in 1950.

Boats during the blessing.

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(L-R): Dave Senior, his sons Deet and Brent and his wife Sue.

Live lobster processing.

All hands on deck at Cervantes

Processing some 840,000kg of rock lobster through facilities at Cervantes and exporting the delicacy under their well known Indian Ocean Rock Lobster brand, the Thompson family's beginnings in the fishing industry were comparatively humble compared to the legacy they share today.

Dropping the odd pot in the mid-60s around the rocky outcrops off Grey, an idyllic but remote coastal beach shack settlement 180km north of Perth, David 'Dogga' Thompson could not have known where his efforts would ultimately lead.

Establishing his reputation and fishing company in the 70s with his three sons, Dave Senior, Michael and Matthew, right beside him, Dogga and the family would introduce lobster processing to their repertoire about 40 years later.

"We set up the Indian Ocean Rock Lobster exporting and processing facilities in 2008 and later in 2010 we established Lobster Shack," Director Dave Thompson Senior said.

"Today we service a range of markets around the world, exporting and processing live lobster all under the one brand.

"What was once a domestic market with very low volumes has evolved into a live market product being distributed to many different buyers both locally and internationally."

Keeping it within the family, lobster fishing has now reached the third generation, with David Senior's sons, David (Deet) and Brent, running the processing side of the business and running their own boats.

"Our current business is catching, processing and exporting lobster – it really is all hands on deck," Dave Senior said.

The large-scale operation runs smoothly with an ordinated system in place to get the lobster from ocean to plate as fresh as possible.

"Our vessels are out between Jurien Bay and Two Rocks, with a small portion from Leeman to Geraldton," Dave Senior said.

"Once the boats return, we collect the catch from the jetties and return it to our factory for processing where we grade it into sizes.

"We have a Marel automated belt system where the lobsters are weighed via laser, sorted into their sizes and then put into the live holding lanes. There are nine different categories for the lobster."

Dave Senior said the family ran two factories, one with an open-circuit system and one a closed circuit.

"The open-circuit system is where seawater is circulated into the factory and back out to the ocean again," he said. "We can't control any variables with this system and it holds up to 18,000kg of lobster at one time.

"Our closed-circuit factory was completed last year and holds 14,000kg of lobster. This system gives us the ability to control and manage the water through biofilters.

"During the winter months we use this factory more, as the water quality is much better than the open circuit."

Once sorted, the live rock lobsters are then packed into 15kg polystyrene boxes, before making their way to plates across the country, and the world.

"We are focusing our business heavily on supplying the domestic market and local seafood suppliers while servicing overseas markets, including Hong Kong, Vietnam, China and the US," Dave Senior said.

Dave Senior's barbecue lobster

INGREDIENTS

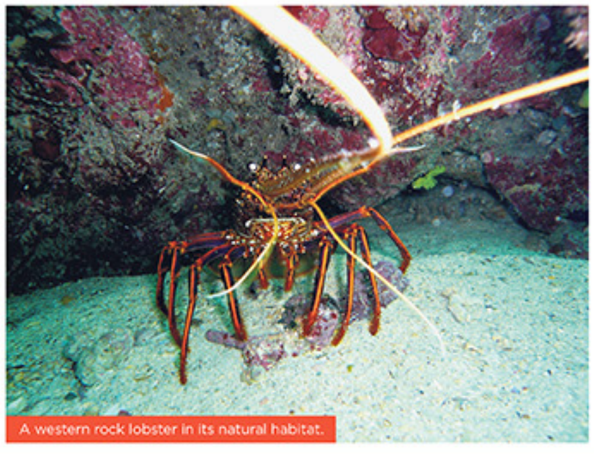
- 1 tsp minced garlic
- 2 tbsp salted butter softened
- 1 lobster approx. 450g

DIRECTIONS

1. Combine the butter and garlic until smooth and set aside.
2. Using a knife, split the lobster in half lengthwise through its head and tail.
3. Wash out the head of the lobster.
4. Have barbecue or grill set on high and place the halved lobster shell side down.
5. Brush the lobster with the garlic butter mix.
6. Cover lobster with lid.
7. Grill for six minutes or until the lobster meat has turned white.

Lobster quotas exist to protect population numbers.

"Currently the commercial fishery does not even take their quota; instead they take a lower number of lobsters as this better serves their markets and the environment."



A western rock lobster in its natural habitat.

World-class fishery a collective effort

Internationally recognised for its focus on environmental sustainability, Western Australia's western rock lobster industry has long prided itself on its best-practice fishery.

Management of lobster stocks and environmental oversight measures have existed in one form or another since the early 1960s, when limitations on the number of licensed vessels and pot numbers were brought in amongst a raft of other changes in an effort to build a cohesive and lasting sector.

It was a big change for an industry which had until then been largely unregulated, and proved to be emblematic of its environmental stewardship approach going forward, backed by ongoing scientific research which has sought to understand and conserve populations of the crustacean.

A crucial part of this has been the monitoring of larval lobster numbers – known as puerulus – which began in 1969 and has enabled the industry to predict the abundance of legal-sized individuals up to four years ahead, helping lobster fishers to take only what the environment can support.

Never content to rest on it laurels, the industry has also not shied from looking beyond its shores to inform its approach.

At the turn of the millennium it became the first fishery in the world to achieve certification from the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a third-party body set up to protect the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the marine ecosystem.

Leading the world in adopting the standard, the fishery has maintained it since and will seek to have itself re-certified for a fifth time in 2022; a testament to an industry adept at collaborative self-management.

"The MSC ensures the stock of lobster is not overfished and remains sustainable for future generations," Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development Principal Research Scientist Simon de Lestang said.

"It also ensures the fishery does not impact on the environment through habitat damage and pollution, and does not impact on other marine species."

The wider benefit of this collective effort from government, researchers and industry is it has led to a thorough understanding of the ecosystems off the shores of our great state, according to Dr de Lestang, who pointed to the mapping and monitoring of large areas to ensure commercial and recreational fishery did not impact sensitive habitats.

The tracking of the ecosystem has also allowed scientists to analyse the impacts and effects of climate change.

This can be seen firsthand in Cervantes, where a special shallow-water survey is conducted each year as part of a larger project studying the survival of baby lobsters and the effect of climate change on marine flora like seagrasses and algae.

It is research such as this that helps inform yearly catch quotas across the industry.

Introduced in 2010 in response to a predicted fluctuation in lobster stocks, the quota system allocates a total allowable commercial catch – adjusted each year based on predicted lobster numbers – to each boat based on the number of pots it is licensed to own.

Dr de Lestang said the quota slowed down the pace of fishing and reinforced that it was in all parties' best interests to put the environment first.

"Currently the commercial fishery does not even take their quota; instead they take a lower number of lobsters as this better serves their markets and the environment," he said.

For Dr de Lestang, this collective restraint among fishers, combined with minimum legal size limits and protections for breeding females, has helped to ensure a sustainable industry for years to come.

"We have set up an annual harvest level based on a conservative minimal level of egg production across the entire fishery," he said.

"Having conservative measures such as the annual harvest level ensures we always have more than enough eggs produced each season, meaning plentiful livestock for future generations."

Simon de Lestang.

Bobby the Lobby at Cervantes Tiger Sharks Football Club.

Contributing to WA's rich community fabric

A thriving industry based on a single species – the spiny lobster – the western rock lobster fishery is a vital part of the Western Australian economy.

Contributing more than half a billion dollars to the state economy prior to COVID-19 and the Chinese import ban, and generating more than 2500 full-time jobs both directly and indirectly through its four key sectors of managed fishery, processed seafood manufacturing, boat building and tourism, the industry has come a long way since commercial fishing first began in the coastal communities of Geraldton, Lancelin and Fremantle in the early 1950s.

According to Western Rock Lobster Council CEO Matt Taylor, employment is filled by the skippers and deckhands fishing for rock lobster on the boat, to staff receiving, storing, exporting and marketing lobster in processing facilities.

"Today there is around 235 boats fishing for the western rock lobster resource," he said. "Before the pandemic, the gross value of production doubled from about $200 million to $435 million, resulting from increasing stock, more efficient fishing practices and the development of the international market."

Communities throughout WA often depend on one main industry as its lifeblood, and in Cervantes that industry is rock lobster fishing and processing.

The industry generates almost $25 million for the Cervantes economy, accounting for 75 per cent of the total economic activity in the town.

Spearheading the industry in the small coastal town is the Thompson family.

Operating one of the longstanding businesses in the region has enabled the Thompsons to play a major role in the progress and sustainability of Cervantes, supporting local employment at Indian Ocean Rock Lobster and giving back to the community through Lobster Shack.

"I think the lobster industry across the state plays an important part in the development of many local communities," Lobster Shack Tourism Manager Abi Thompson said. "Our business contributes substantially to local employment, with more than 60 staff members in our peak period.

"The permanent staff we employ from Perth move with their families to Cervantes which then feeds the local primary school, rental market, the local football club, general store, post office, fuel station and eateries within our community."

Not mention the local trades – electrician, building company and plumber – which are kept on their toes by the work they do for the business.

One collaboration that has been crucial to the success of the Cervantes rock lobster industry and, in turn, the community, has been the partnership with WA tourism operators; the Thompsons having the foresight to recognise the positive impact tourism can have on regional communities.

The opportunities created by a flourishing tourism industry cast a wide net across retail, dining, accommodation, small tour operators and, of course, employment.

"The Lobster Shack feeds the town with tourism; we have spent the last 11 years promoting the Lobster Shack to the tourism industry, welcoming 100,000 visitors per year to the area," Abi said.

"We work alongside more than 80 tour companies which cater to group travel and also a self-drive market. These visitors come into the town, stay at local accommodation and use all the amenities the town has to offer."

Lots of visitors means business is good, and good business allows the Thompson family to pay it forward to a community they love being a part of.

As the major sponsor for local football club the Cervantes Tiger Sharks each year, Lobster Shack supplies the club with food, refrigerated truck use, funds and however else they can support the club.

"We also donate to fundraisers in town, money from which go to the local school," Abi said.

"The lobster industry is crucial to Cervantes and we have quite a good following with the locals," Director Dave Thompson Senior added.

Western rock lobsters.

Lobster Pioneers of Western Australia

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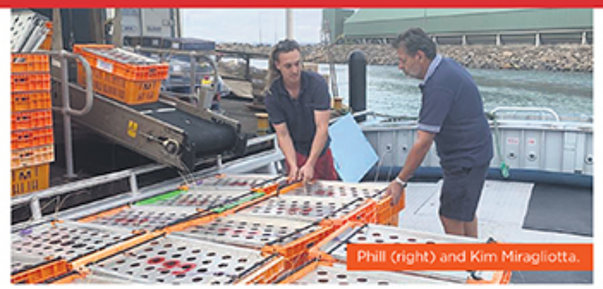
Frank Miragliotta.



Phill (right) and Kim Miragliotta.

Deep roots in the Geraldton community

At the turn of the 20th century, 14-year-old Francesco Miragliotta left his homeland of Italy and migrated to Perth for a better life.

His father had been an engineer in Sicily and he was unfamiliar with fishing, but to support himself he joined a crew in Fremantle and began wet lining and catching lobster.

Between 1934 and 1938, he headed to Geraldton and bought his own vessel, Tartan, in partnership with his sons Felice and Rincie.

He snagged up to 60 dozen lobsters per ship and exported them to Singapore until the market was disrupted at the beginning of World War II.

Reflecting on his family's heritage, Geraldton stalwart Phill Miragliotta said it was likely his grandfather was one of the first people to export lobster from Western Australia, a practice that has since flourished into a $500 million industry.

Phill said he himself became engrossed in the industry when he was in his early 20s, after spending time pulling pots with his father Felice.

"I worked on deck with my father until he went on holidays in New Zealand. When he returned he didn't come back to work, so I took over," he said.

Fishing the ocean in Geraldton for 37 years, Phill retired in 2015 and handed the baton to his son Kim – the fourth generation of Miragliottas to take over the family business.

With almost four decades out at sea, Phill has witnessed an astronomical shift in the way lobsters are found, caught and sold, leading to a number of industry improvements for fishers, buyers and lobsters.

He named the navigation experience as one of the biggest transformations, with the technology evolving from keeping sum logs and using echo sounders to unreliable radar and, later, ultra-precise GPS.

Similarly, Phill said there had been a lot of developments in lobster care, with the fishing bags to service the 1970s frozen market replaced with aerated tanks of flowing water.

Phill believes new fishers will largely benefit from an evolved industry, particularly when it comes to work-life balance.

"They will have a lot better family life than I ever did," Phill said. "I would come home at six at night and leave for the Abrolhos Islands at two in the morning, but it's different now – new fishers will enjoy it more."

Though not without its challenges, Phill described working on the ocean as the experience of a lifetime and particularly loved fishing at the Abrolhos Islands for its ever-changing sea floor, the ability to always learn something new and it's thriving fisher community that was always up for a chinwag after a long day on the boat.

For the retired fisher, journeying through the sunshine and sea spray was healthy, often amazing and sometimes left him feeling that he should be paying to enjoy it.

But part of the appeal was his brother Frank, who also learnt the tricks of the trade from the head of the household, and often challenged Phill to some playful competition.

"I enjoyed working with my brother Frank – very competitive – who worked on my father's other boat," Phill said. "We would always be in contest about who could catch the most lobster – it really motivated me."

Another motivation for Phill was his father's sound advice, "the effort you put in is proportional to the rewards", as well as to enjoy the art of lobster fishing as it was a great way to earn a living.

While Phill has largely retired from pulling pots, he is still involved in the industry's back-end and helping Kim keep the Miragliotta business alive.

In a nod to his family and Italian heritage, and perhaps The Godfather franchise, Kim skippers the vessel Don Felice and continues to operate from Geraldton.

With the Mid West port city a haven for the Miragliotta family for roughly 90 years, Phill said he had deep roots in the community, including fostering a family legacy across recreational, sport and, of course, fishing circles.

Serving on the Geraldton Fishermen's Co-operative board with his father and brother for 60 of its 70 years collectively, Phill is also a member of the Geraldton Professional Fishermen's Association and was involved with the Blessing of the Fleet.

A community man through and through, he is also a member of the Midwest Caravan Club of WA and the Geraldton Clay Target Club.

Kim's barbecue lobster in Asian sauce

INGREDIENTS

Main:
- Rock lobster

Sauce:
- 3 tablespoons of fish sauce
- 3 tablespoons of sweet chilli sauce
- 1 tablespoon of lime juice
- 2 cloves of garlic crushed
- 1 tablespoon of grated ginger

DIRECTIONS

Main:
- Halve the lobster tails and marinate it in some of the sauce for half an hour.
- Use a very hot barbecue hotplate, cook the tails flesh down for three minutes then flip them over and cook shell side down.
- Add a liberal amount of the remaining sauce with a brush and cook for another three minutes. If you have a barbecue hood, cook with the hood down.
- Serve with crushed peanuts and Thai basil or coriander, and a glass of chilled sauvignon blanc.

Sauce:
- Mix the ingredients until it tastes awesome.

Passing on the family legacy

For Geraldton fisherman Peter Bailey, his six-decade family legacy starts in a small town in the outback, beginning with his grandfather.

Working as a kangaroo shooter and prospector in Cue – a Murchison haven a handful of hours from the nearest beach – Peter's grandfather packed his bags and made his way to Dongara to become one of the area's first fishermen when things got tough and work had dried up.

"This was in the 60s and it was a challenging job – it was not at all stable," Peter said.

Starting out on a small dinghy with an outboard, things were primitive for the Bailey family. However, the early days of lobster fishing was far from a celebrated and rewarding affair.

Marred by shorter fishing seasons, the value in lobster fishing wasn't there and the job was less than desirable in the eyes of many.

"I'll tell you, when my mother said she had met a lobster fishermen, her parents weren't too impressed," Peter said.

A resilient work ethic pulled the family through, however, and a rainbow in the otherwise gloomy sky revealed itself when the live export market opened to Japan and technology began to revolutionise lobster catching.

Now Peter is the third generation to uphold the family legacy, throwing pots in the sea at the age of 15 from the breathtaking Houtman Abrolhos – a collection of more than 100 islands off Geraldton's coast, with three main island groups spanning 100km of ocean.

The spectacular cluster is about 60km away from the Geraldton shoreline and is a hotbed of unique biodiversity and a known sanctuary for lobster fishing families.

Born and bred on the Mid West coast and growing up in an Abrolhos camp, Peter learnt the ins and outs of the fishing business from a young age.

He now leads a crew of five across two boats in the waters around Geraldton and the Abrolhos and is teaching his own children – a daughter and a son aged 20 and 21 – all about lobster fishing.

Peter said his son learnt a trade before jumping aboard the family boat about 18 months ago, while his daughter had been pulling pots with him for about three years.

"Commercial fishers were never able to fish recreationally, but they have changed the rules and given us that flexibility, so it's now become a family activity," Peter said. "There's excitement and enthusiasm involved."

Falling in love with being his own boss and the flexibility that comes with it, Peter said fishing for lobster was far more business-oriented than it used to be.

Reflecting on his years growing up at the Abrolhos, he said the "phenomenal" lifestyle now required more investment, better boats and the ability to persevere through a 12-month season.

"Working on the boat is probably the easiest part of the job," Peter said. "But we fish because we love it."

Over his 34 years fishing in Mid West waters, Peter said he had seen a variety of changes hit his industry, most notably the rock lobster quota.

Peter Bailey.

The marine heatwave together with increased fishing efficiency lowered stocks, so industry approached government to introduce a quota system to ensure the sustainability of the fishery.

Although industry now thrives under quota, it came at a significant cost including boats and jobs.

Brendan Pratt.

Shore Leave a time to celebrate

Mid West residents will rediscover their sun-drenched backyard at Western Australia's first Shore Leave festival, a September tribute to the region's culture and produce.

The inaugural event, developed in collaboration with the Geraldton community, will unlock the region's $161 million fishing industry and connect the public with families that power it across a jam-packed itinerary of food and fun.

Truly celebrating premium regional produce, including the internationally-renowned western rock lobster, the event is expected to attract visitors to the region to support local businesses and jobs.

For visitors eager to set sail, the Abrolhos Long Table lunch at Turtle Bay on East Wallabi Island will be an unmissable event against a backdrop of sun and sea.

Geraldton lobster fisherman Jarrad Franceschi.

Presented by the Western Rock Lobster Council, the ticketed lunch can be reached by boat or plane and will be a gourmet food experience curated by talented chef Brendan Pratt.

The seafood menu will also be paired with a beautiful selection of Vasse Felix varieties, as well as other Western Australian beverages.

People wishing to craft their own seafood spectacular can pick up a few key ingredients at the Beach Price Fish Markets, which will feature lobster straight off the boat and other diverse seafood.

Throughout the market, visitors will also spot a variety of educational workshops, activations, preparation and cooking demonstrations from chefs and fishers, as well as access tours and other industry activities.

Standing out in a crowd of delectable events is the Western Rock Lobster – Back of Boat Sales, a day-long trade of fresh lobster at the Fishermen's Wharf.

Buyers are encouraged to bring their own cash, bag, esky and ice for the sought-after crustaceans and to have a chat about delicious recipes with the lobster fishers.

Western Rock Lobster CEO Matt Taylor said this particular event was a unique opportunity to put fresh food into the hands of locals and visitors.

"It is fantastic that fishers are once again able to sell directly from their boats to the public, restaurants and retailers," Mr Taylor said.

"This community connection is important to our industry and now we have a mechanism in place that allows locals and tourists to purchase fresh lobster easily and consistently throughout the year."

Also a partner in the inaugural Shore Leave is Geraldton Fishermen's Co-operative, an almost 70-year institution that is the world's biggest processor and exporter of rock lobster.

Geraldton Fishermen's Co-operative CEO Matt Rutter said the four-day festival was designed to put the port city's high-value marine species on a platter for locals and visitors, and catapult the lobster capital into a regional destination.

"The event is expected to draw visitors from across the state and positively impact tourism operators in the Mid West region," Mr Rutter said.

Boasting a fun festival program developed hand in hand with the Mid West community, Shore Leave will also feature beloved traditions in the region such as the annual Blessing of the Fleet.

Meanwhile, seafood-lovers worried the September festival will clash with the AFL Grand Final need not worry, with the blockbuster game scheduled to be screened at The Helm, located on Geraldton Foreshore.

Point Moore.

While there, footy fans will be able to pop across to Fishermen's Wharf and grab a live lobster, which can be walked back to Geraldton Foreshore and cooked on the barbecue by an event chef right in front of them.

Mr Rutter said visitors would be surprised at the sheer number of attractions and things to do in the region, and he was happy Shore Leave would be an incentive to visit and explore an underrecognised part of the state, only about four hours' drive from Perth.

"If you haven't been to the Mid West before, Shore Leave is the perfect opportunity to experience what this corner of the world has to offer," Mr Rutter said.

"It's also a chance for locals to rediscover and explore their backyard, which is why the festival program has been developed in close collaboration with the local community."

A diverse festival program from premium dining events in spectacular locations, to family-friendly activities and free events along the beautiful Geraldton Foreshore, Shore Leave will kick off in Geraldton from September 24-27.

For more information, visit www.shoreleavefestival.com.au.

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Western Rock Lobster

Blessing of the Fleet in Western Australia

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A recent blessing event at Jurien Bay.

Blessing of the Fleet 2021 in Geraldton.

Catholic Priests at the procession in Fremantle.

Madonna Di Capo D'Orlando.

The Invincible carrying Madonna at Fremantle in 1950.

Celebrations at Dongara in 2000.

Join the parade in Freo next Sunday

Fremantle's Blessing of the Fleet Festival is set to light up the streets of our port city next Sunday October 24.

The public is invited to attend the morning Mass at St Patrick's Basilica at 9.30am and then join a riot of colour and noise later in the day, as the procession makes its way from the basilica at 2pm and parades through the city streets down to the harbour.

This year, fishing boats Neptune 111 and Leading Edge will have the honour of carrying Madonna dei Martiri and La Madonna di Capo d'Orlando around the harbour before the blessings take place.

Geraldton's Madonna Del Aqua.

Bouyant and colourful

Rooted in Italy's southern fishing town of Molfetta – the annual blessing of the fleet is an age-old tradition celebrated by generations of Italian families.

So important is the tradition, which offers prayers and blessings for a successful season at sea, that its reach has over the years extended to the other side of the world, riding the waves of migration to sister city Fremantle and beyond on the backs of generations of Italian seafarers.

Traditionally held in October, the event's spread to multiple locations and the expansion of the season to year-round has seen celebrations staggered throughout the year and taking on different forms.

One that still models itself strongly on its roots, however, is Fremantle's colourful and lively event.

Fishing Fleet Festival Association President John Minutillo said Fremantle's blessing had evolved in size and stature since its humble beginnings in 1948.

"It was started in Fremantle by a bunch of fishermen who had the blessings in their hometown of Molfetta, and decided to continue the tradition when they came to the port city," he said.

The blessing runs on the second last Sunday of October, with a large procession of fishermen of all cultural backgrounds and members of the community walking from St Patrick's Basilica down to Fremantle Fishing Boat Harbour – each community commonly carrying traditional banners or religious objects.

For the Molfettese community, this object is a statue of the Madonna of the Martyrs, or Madonna dei Martiri.

"The first year they had no procession, and then in the second year they started the procession and brought out the Madonna dei Martiri statue – the same as the major statue they use in Molfetta," Mr Minutillo said.

In the following years, the prominent Sicilian community in Fremantle, many members of which trace their roots to the city of Capo d'Orlando on the island's north coast, also jumped on board the tradition, bringing their own holy statue to the ceremony – La Madonna di Capo d'Orlando.

Entrenched in Catholicism, the blessing of the fleet in Fremantle is far from exclusive to the Italian communities, with the Portuguese community another historic pioneer of the fishing tradition.

"The Portuguese have their own celebration called Our Lady of Fatima in May and they have a procession around St Patrick's Basilica at night time," Mr Minutillo said.

"The Lady of Fatima is their statue which they follow like our Madonna dei Martiri. They joined in with our procession 15 to 20 years after they began."

Mr Minutillo said Croatian culture was also present in the history of Fremantle's blessing, which has today become a melting pot for the port city's diverse communities.

Just over 400km up the coast, Geraldton's fishing industry also celebrates a rich history of immigrant influence.

Here, it is the Madonna del' Aqua around which the blessing of the fleet revolves. Carved in 1964 by Italian migrant artist Dan Mazzotti, the statue's name translates to 'Our Lady of the Waters'.

Diocese of Geraldton Chancellor and Director of Heritage Father Robert Cross said the statue had deep meaning for the community's generational fishers.

"The statue is part of the procession and they put it on a boat on the harbour," he said.

"For many years they stopped using the statue, which was specially carved for the event and has a fishing boat and the cathedral in Geraldton carved into its pedestal.

event steeped in tradition

"Around 2003 I re-introduced the statue and some of the local adults came to me in tears because it brought back their link to their parents and grandparents."

With such rich traditions in Fremantle and Geraldton, it is perhaps little wonder that celebrations have come to be had in the smaller fishing towns in between these hubs.

In Dongara, the blessing started in 1973.

Dongara Blessing of the Fleet Committee Member Linda Cole said the procession through the town and down to the harbour drew a lot of curious locals and tourists, who were often encouraged to jump on board with the fishers and become immersed in the action.

"We invite members of the public to come onto our boats to go for the ride out around the harbour and come back in and get blessed," she said.

With priests from all four of the town's churches contributing, there's no shortage of blessings to go around at the Dongara event, which Ms Cole said had become a key date on the local calendar.

Festivities on the day include judging of the attending boats and rope coiling competitions.

It's a similar story in Jurien Bay, where blessing of the fleet events have grown, particularly over the last decade.

"Blessings would have started in 1988 when the marina opened," recently retired fisherman Stephen McLeary said.

"There were heaps of people going to the event annually, but it fell away after about 14 years. I started up the blessings again and took the event to the centre of town at the Jurien Foreshore around 2000."

Mr McLeary said the move to the foreshore saw hundreds of people watching off the jetty and beach.

Today the blessing happens as part of the Indian Ocean Festival.

Mr McLeary said while the Jurien Bay blessing did not follow the original Molfetese tradition, it still represented a great coming together of Australian, Italian and Greek cultures.

Further north along WA's Coral Coast, Kalbarri's blessing of the fleet has adopted free-spirited and laid-back traditions built around family, friendship and plenty of fun.

Kalbarri fisherman Robbie Glass puts the start of the blessing in Kalbarri at around the late 1960s and describes it as a relaxed opportunity for all the fishers and their families to gather before the real work starts.

"We didn't have the cultural significance that Fremantle had," he said. "No-one was really aligned, religiously."

Ian Ralph, another local fisherman, echoed this, though the religious element of the pre-season celebrations had been present for a time, he said.

"Catholic and Anglican priests where in attendance to do a joint blessing, stepping across each boat to bless it and its crew," he said.

Both fishermen said they had fond memories of the blessing as children.

"It was just a fun day," Mr Glass said. "There was tug-of-war and other fun games, and even on the boat we'd have water bomb fights, and the boats would all race down the river."

A homage to the local pioneers of the fishing communities dotted along WA's coastline, many of whom are of immigrant and Catholic backgrounds, Father Cross said the various blessing of the fleet celebrations played a large part in preserving local history and heritage.

"Our heritage really grounds us into our identity, both at a family level and as a community," he said.

"I think it's important we do have these occasions, and you don't have to be religious to celebrate and support all of this tradition."

The original Fremantle Blessing of the Fleet Committee in 1948.

As luck would have it

With such a rich annual tradition dedicated to ensuring good luck for sailors as they venture out to sea, it stands to reason superstition is commonplace among Western Australia's lobster fishers.

"Don't take bananas out on the boat, it's bad luck," Jurien Bay fisherman Stephen McLeary said.

"If someone brought bananas on the boat they would get a bit of a rev up."

While this might seem strange to the uninitiated, Mr McLeary was not the only fisherman to point out the innocent fruit as a bad omen.

"Bananas are bad luck on boats, that's an old one," Kalbarri fisherman Ian Ralph said.

"I don't stop my crew from bringing them on board, but if something goes wrong I blame it on them," he said.

Quick to claim he is not overly superstitious himself, Mr Ralph explained other fishers in the area had their peculiar ways.

"Some of the fishermen I have worked for would never set a line at 13 or never wear red jocks to work," he said.

Mr McLeary said leaving port on Friday was another act thought to invite bad luck, though he noted many in Jurien Bay took no heed to this one.

It would seem WA's lobster fishermen are much more inclined to think positively.

Mr McLeary, for instance, said he trusted in a handy gold lobster which he and his crew would touch for good luck.

"A lot of fishermen have their crosses on their boats with the Italian style of beads hanging off them," he said. "And it is always good to be blessed by the priests at the end of the jetty to sail safe and come back in one piece."