Darden Restaurants Names Northern Fishermen Co-Op 'Distinguished Vendor'

ORLANDO, Fla., May 25 -- Darden Restaurants, Inc. (NYSE: DRI), the world's largest casual dining company, presented the Northern Fishermen Cooperative, a key supplier of rock lobsters based in the Central American nation of Belize, with its top award for vendor excellence at this week's National Restaurant Association Show. This honor recognizes the Northern Fishermen Cooperative for its quality, value, service and support.

Darden, which owns and operates more than 1,150 Red Lobster, Olive Garden, Bahama Breeze and Smokey Bones BBQ & Sports Bar restaurants, presented Northern Fisherman with its William B. Darden Distinguished Vendor Award, named in honor of the company's founder.

"The Northern Fishermen Co-Op has been supplying us with quality rock lobsters for 25 years," said Joe Lee, Darden Chairman and Chief Executive Officer. "One of the reasons we originally chose them as a supplier is their commitment to conservation and environmental sustainability. That commitment is even stronger today and mirrors Darden's passion for being responsible stewards of the environment."

The Northern Fishermen Co-op prides itself on its self-regulation and efforts to protect this valuable seafood resource. They don't take lobsters weighing less than four ounces, always return egg-bearing lobsters to the sea, and have experimented with artificial habitats to protect the lobsters from predators.

"It's very rare, especially in the seafood business, to have as long and close a partnership as we've had with the Northern Fishermen," said Red Lobster President Dick Rivera. "We greatly value their efforts to make sure we have a sustainable supply of healthy, affordable lobsters for our guests."

The William B. Darden Distinguished Vendor Award salutes world-class vendors for outstanding quality, service, innovation and value. Darden's purchasing, marketing and culinary experts chose the Northern Fishermen Cooperative from the more than 2,000 vendors the restaurant company did business with in fiscal 2001 (which ends May 31).

"While other lobstering companies have come and gone, Northern has survived and prospered, and they've certainly helped Red Lobster and Darden prosper through the years, too," said Barry Moullet, senior vice president of Purchasing for Darden Restaurants.

The Northern Fishermen Cooperative consists of more than 600 fishermen, all descendants of the co-op's original founders. In addition to harvesting rock lobsters, the Co-op also processes other seafood at their plant in Belize.