



Boats, buoys, and deck chairs: Life on Maine's coast.

Maine Squeeze

Indie chefs have fallen big time for Portland. One long weekend is all it takes.

BY MARGARET LOFTUS

PORTLAND, MAINE, HAS REACHED SUPERSTAR STATUS IN THE CULINARY universe. The first clue comes at Hugo's tiny bar on the outskirts of the Old Port, the city's revitalized waterfront on Casco Bay. As I sip a bacon-infused old-fashioned, my neighbor surreptitiously snaps pictures of her own cocktail, a pretty Canton ginger liqueur concoction with pear nectar and a light dusting of pink peppercorns. The mini photo shoot continues through her first course – a grilled beef heart Caesar – and, I assume, right through dessert. Is she from a competing restaurant? A critic? Not necessarily, says Hugo's general manager Arlin Smith. "It happens on a regular basis."

The word is out on Portland. With a profusion of chef-owned restaurants, from pioneering seafood house Street and Co. to newcomer sushi spot Food Factory Miyake, the city of 64,000 supports a food scene that rivals destinations many times its size and is now celebrated in an annual food festival, Harvest on the Harbor (October 21 through 23, 2010). Portland today is a far cry from not long ago, when chefs

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WANDERLUST QUICK ESCAPE

competed to churn out the best lobster rolls and fried clams.

Back then, fishing was still king – a livelihood that instilled the down-to-earth sensibility you'll discover here. In contrast to other Eastern seaboard cities that showcase preserved colonial architecture, Portland's cobblestoned streets are lined with Victorian buildings, built after the devastating 1866 fire that erased evidence of its founding in 1632. Though not as thriving as it once was, fishing remains an important part of the town, but in recent years Maine-centric shops and chic boutiques have breathed new life into Old Port's redbrick warehouses.

The Old Port's transformation from down-on-its-heels district to trendy destination is now creeping to the edges of downtown. In the once-industrial East End, high-concept restaurants like Hugo's nestle unassumingly between tile stores and holdover taverns. A handful of blocks to the west, the Maine College of Art anchors the Arts District, a strip of galleries, museums, and theater companies along Congress Street. Great food, salty character, and a bit of art and shopping for good measure are all the ingredients needed for the perfect New England getaway.

A TEN-MINUTE DRIVE FROM OLD PORT, the elegant Inn by the Sea makes a prime base for Portland explorations. The shingle-style hotel sits above a sandy beach and has recently undergone a multimillion-dollar facelift, adding a spa, new restaurant, and lounge. Audubon engravings depicting local wildlife incorporate the property's surroundings, which include a bird sanctuary and butterfly way station. Each year, typically in September, says Rauni Kew, the inn's green program manager, the property is aflutter with monarch butterflies: "The first caterpillar we see, the staff goes berserk." When not strolling through Portland, riding bikes, or hiking the nearby nature trails, guests can loll on Crescent Beach, kick back in an Adirondack chair, or cozy up with a hotel-provided Kindle while they lounge at the spa. Most of the 57 guest rooms resemble two-floor condos that feel more like a home than a hotel – albeit a home with a panoramic view of the Atlantic, complete with lobster boats bobbing in the distance.

Those very vessels, I later learn, likely hail from Alewife's Brook Farm down the road, whose catch graces the menu at the inn's Sea Glass restaurant. Not to be outdone by farm-to-table dining downtown, chef Mitchell



The irresistible tastes of Duckfat.



Hugo's pork belly.

(DUCKFAT) PETER FRANK EDWARDS, (HUGO) RUSSELL FRENCH, (DOWNTOWN) RYAN KETTERMAN

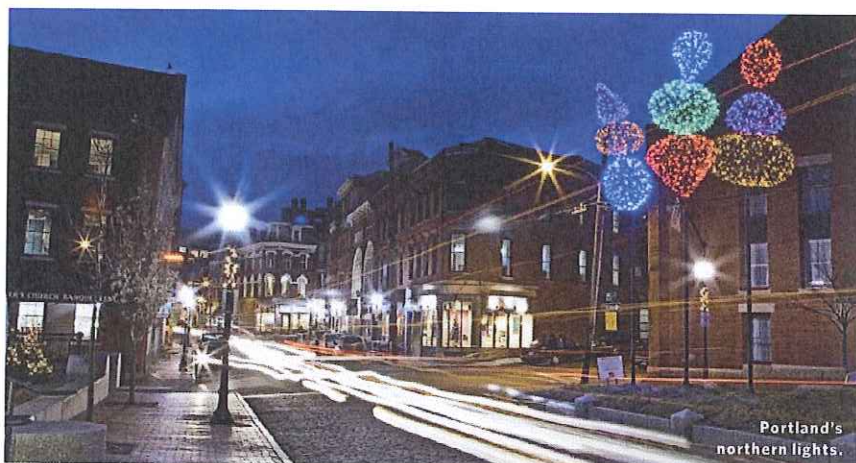
Kaldrovich brings his native Argentine flair to dishes such as lobster paella with chorizo and pan-seared jumbo scallops. Homey desserts get a Continental spin: A caramelized chocolate bread pudding comes topped with *dulce de leche* gelato, and the cheesecake includes goat cheese from a nearby farm.

Back in the heart of the Old Port, block after block of one-off shops call my name. Earth-toned mugs and bowls from Monroe Salt Works and a huge selection of Bunzlauer stoneware from Poland fill the shelves at Maxwell's Pottery. There are condiment king Stonewall Kitchen

and Blanche & Mimi, a hip home boutique where finds run from vintage lanterns to Libeco-Lagae Belgian linens.

A few blocks away on the waterfront, Browne Trading Company is the go-to seafood and caviar purveyor for star chefs, among them Daniel Boulud. Two oversized chalkboards above the fish cases detail the provenance of the day's catch; Casco Bay, just steps outside the door, figures prominently. Personally, I'm drawn to the shop's vast cache of made-in-Maine treats and buy a bottle of locally made lavender mead out of curiosity (alas, it tastes a bit like laundry detergent).

After a quick stop at the cavernous No-vare Res Bier Café, which pours some 25 brews on tap, including cask ales, and some 300 others in bottles, my husband and I venture a few blocks west to the Arts District and the I. M. Pei-designed Portland Museum of Art. Major European movements are well represented in the museum's permanent works, but its American, particularly Maine, collection shouldn't be missed. We gravitate toward the gallery dedicated



Portland's northern lights.

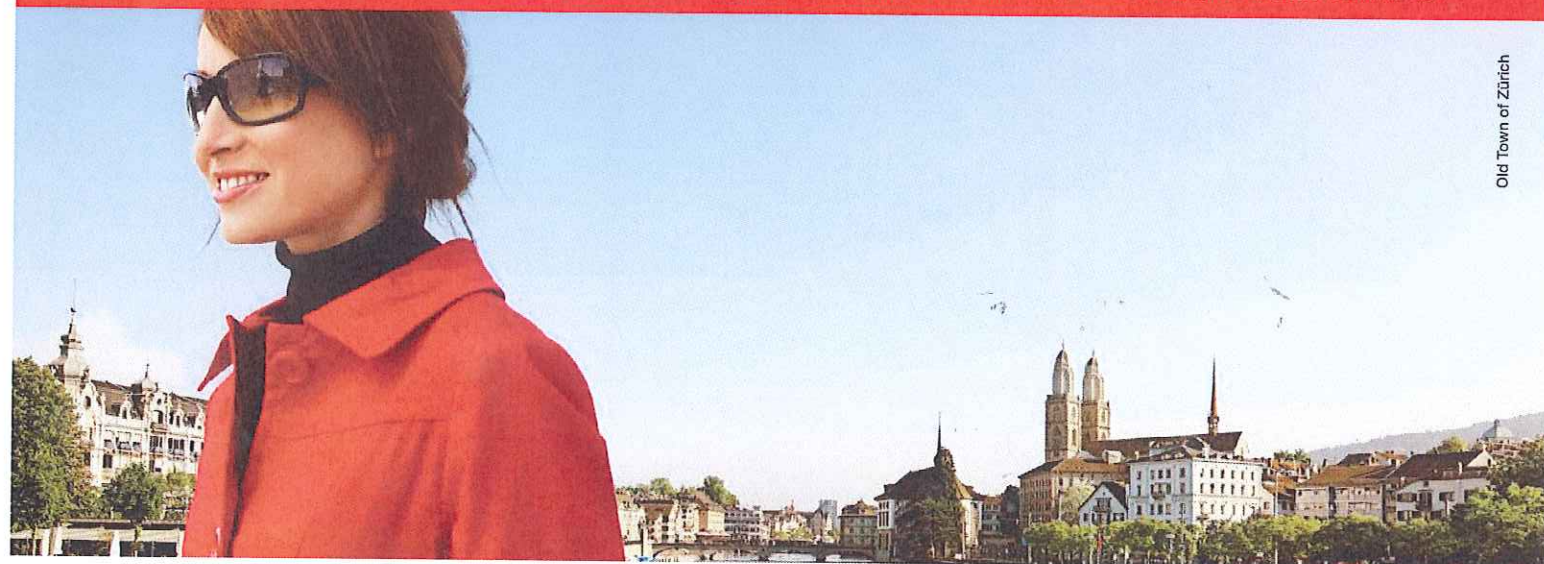


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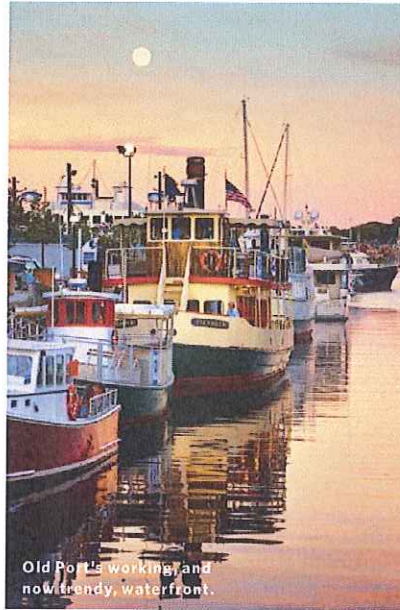


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Old Port's working, and now trendy, waterfront.



Bresca's seasonal dessert.

to Winslow Homer, who spent the last 25 years of his life just 12 miles away in Prouts Neck, painting what some say are his best works, including *Weatherbeaten*, the famous brooding seascape that hangs here.

WITH MORE THAN 200 RESTAURANTS TO choose from, picking a dinner spot can be daunting. An informal poll of locals leads us to Bresca, a cozy gem in the Old Port that has received raves in the national press but still feels low-key. One bite of gnocchi with sautéed mushrooms and sherry-stewed onions in a fontina fondue, and another of honey-glazed duck breast cradled in mascarpone polenta, its richness foiled by pickled nectarine, validates the acclaim.

Bresca chef and co-owner Krista Kern Desjarlais exemplifies much of Portland's young culinary talent. Having cooked in top kitchens in the U.S. and Europe, including New York's *Le Cirque* and *Guy Savoy* in Paris, she moved to the Old Port three years ago, in part for its affordability and thriving supporting cast of farmers, fishermen, brewers, bakers, and assorted artisans, from cheesemakers to beekeepers, whose bounty has become standard on menus across town.

"You have all these small restaurants that are chef-owned and -operated," says

Samantha Hoyt Lindgren, co-owner of *Rabelais*, a bookstore dedicated to cookbooks, including rare finds. "The chefs show up on the plate; it's not a corporate entity, it's personal food."

The next day brings sunshine and a hike around Fort Williams Park to see its iconic Portland Head Lighthouse. Commissioned by George Washington and built in 1791, the white conical tower and red-gable-roofed keeper's house preside over the rocky coast at the southwest entrance to Portland Harbor. The scene feels oddly familiar; it's among the most photographed lighthouses, making regular appearances on calendars, coffee-table books, and postcards.

Soon the sea air stirs a craving, and we find ourselves at the aptly named *Lobster Shack*, surrounded on three sides by water in a quintessential Down East setting. The fried clams are a tangle of crunchy, briny bites; the lobster roll bursts with huge chunks of buttery seafood crowned with a knob of mayonnaise. Turns out, even the taste of old Portland is delicious.

FAST FACT

After San Francisco and New York City, diners spend more money per person in restaurants in Portland than in any other city in the U.S.

(OLD PORT) JON HICKS/CORBIS; (BRESCA) JESSICA SCHWARTZBERG

NOW SERVING: PORTLAND

Keys to a classic - and delicious - fall weekend in New England.

STAY The beachfront 57-room **Inn by the Sea** is heavy on Portland character (maple furnishings, locally commissioned artwork, great dining) and light on pretension. Ask the restaurant to prepare a gourmet picnic basket for the beach or a bike ride, or let the concierge plan an outing, from lobster boat and fishing charters to hot-air balloon rides for the ultimate view of fall color. *Doubles from \$189, including breakfast and a \$50 resort credit.*

EAT Pan-fried lamb's tongue and roasted Maine monkfish with oxtail pierogi are the sort of dishes that garnered **Hugo's** Rob Evans a nod from the James Beard Foundation for best chef in the Northeast last year. *88 Middle Street; 207/774-8538; www.hugos.net.*

Less is more is the motto at **Street and Co.**, where just-off-the-boat seafood shines with minimal prep, like the Maine crabmeat sautéed



Inn by the Sea.

in brown butter with mushrooms. *33 Wharf St.; 207/775-0887; www.streetandcompany.net.*

Chef/owner Masa Miyake pays homage to Maine with quahog sushi and lobster sashimi at **Food Factory Miyake**. *BYO sake. 129 Spring Street; 207/871-9170; www.restaurantmiyake.com.*

The line snakes out the door at **Duckfat** for good reason: crispy Belgian *frites*, especially *poutine*-style (slathered in cheese curds and duck gravy). *43 Middle Street; 207/774-8080; www.duckfat.com.*

You're in for a treat if you're lucky enough to score one of **Bresca's** handful of tables. Try the Roman gnocchi and buttermilk *panna cotta*. *111 Middle Street; 207/772-1004; www.restaurantbresca.com.*

SHOP With block-printed Plover organic bedding, vintage dishware, and *très chic* babywear, **Blanche & Mimi** is all about clean design and vibrant colors. *184 Middle Street; 207/774-3900; www.blancheandmimi.com.*

Cookbook store **Rabelais** specializes in rare finds and serves as the unofficial hub of Portland's culinary community. *86 Middle Street; 207/774-1044; www.rabelaisbooks.com. VI.*

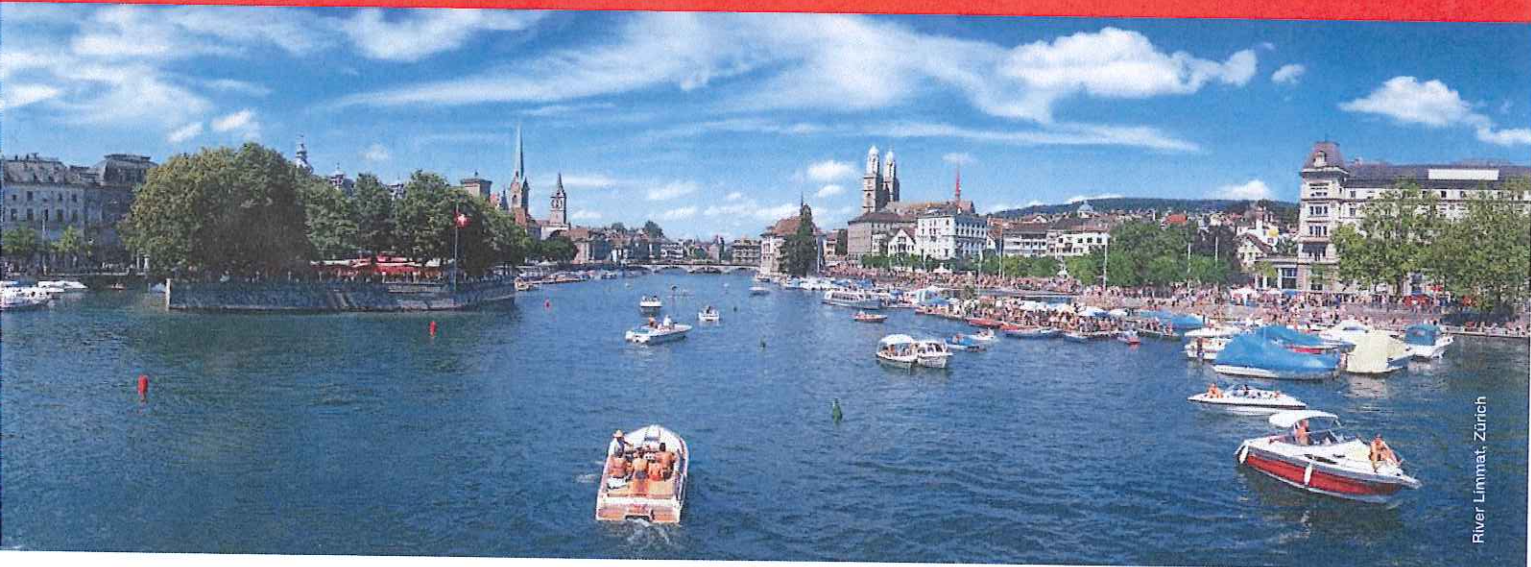
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