Winter Fun In Kennebunkport

December 2, 2020

Cookie Jones crouch in soft scarves and specially-blend eyewear for the season in Nanan Shaw's continuous and cozy aesthetic. Photo by Kate Ross.

By Alexandra Hall | Photography by Lauren Hottinger
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Buckle up for Christmas Prelude in the Kennebunks—one of the country's most adored holiday festivals

THE TWIN TOWNS OF Kennebunkport and Kennebunk are, by and large, known for taking things seriously: their venerable maritime history, stately, colonial-era homes, and the overwhelming culture of preppiness that stretches back to the past 40, when the holidays approach, things take on a decidedly less serious tone. Considered one of the premier Christmas events in the country, Christmas Prelude (known locally simply as Prelude) is when the towns transform into a sort of caring, shopping, drinking, and merrymaking—a kind of Rockwellian Carnivale meets Lowrider holiday party.

Locals band with visitors from across the globe for its revels. Out come the Santa hats, reindeer antlers, and Christmas sweaters for parades, carols, tree lightings, and various Mass. This year, it all runs from December 2nd to the 12th, and after Prelude's unique twists last year thanks to the pandemic, Cape Cod residents are more than eager for a cautious and safe return to an in-person festival. It's an ideal destination for December's Drive. Read on to learn what owners of local boutiques, galleries, restaurants, and theaters are looking to celebrate.

To start, center yourself at the heart of all it, in Dock Square. That's where Prelude kicks off with a ceremonial lighting of the town Christmas tree—the geographic and symbolic focal point of the entire festival.

"We're the first shop people pass over the bridge into Kennebunkport," says Melanie Shmaltz, owner of **Dock Square Emporium**. "We welcome them with a smile and recommend places to eat or visit." And of course, she's also hoping they'll stop by her shop, which sells handmade goat's milk soap from Rocky Point Farm in Buxton and maple syrup-scented candles from Kennebunkport's Sea Love Candles. "We love local things that trigger people's relaxation, relief, and nostalgia—especially during the holidays," says Melanie. And they're perfectly positioned to do so. "We have the perfect vantage point to watch people in the middle of everything during Prelude."

Dock Square Emporium owner Melanie Shmaltz and her son Ryan in front of their shop in Kennebunkport's Dock Square. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

While there, be sure to look for the innovative and beautiful gift books created by another Kennebunkport company, **Cider Mill Press**. The independent publisher sells its artful cookbooks, humorous parodies, and inspirational titles at its shop in Kennebunkport's Dock Square Emporium and in nearby Biddeford. Cider Mill's New York Times bestselling edition of *The Night Before Christmas, The Christmas Cookie Cookbook*, and *Everything I Learned in Life I Learned from Tom Hanks*. "We develop all the book ideas in-house and hire writers and artists to bring our creations to fruition," says founder John Whalen.

Cider Mill Press's Kate Ross and Lauren Hottinger in front of the company's Biddeford office. Photo by Kate Ross.

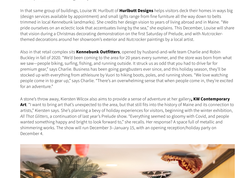
Across the bridge in Kennebunk, drop in for a pint of specially made Prelude ale, **Federal Jack's** owner on-site at the brew pub—and upscale, winter-friendly dive bar, Dock Square Emporium's sister shop, Melanie mentals. "Prelude is a really cool thing to be a part of," says General Manager Erin Marcotte. "People come in with city hats and fancy sweaters, and the whole property is decked out with holiday decor." Meanwhile, the Thursday prize Prelude ale, Federal Jack's holds a party, complete with heated outdoor seating, holiday music, and a Santa (Marcotte's husband), and one of the town's best views of the port.

Dock Square, lit up for the holiday season. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

Steps away sits the multifaceted, thoroughly dynamic **Maine Art Hill**. More of a campus than anything, it's home to a gallery, shows, and studios that showcase the work of regional and Maine artists—not to mention a mesmerizing wind-sculpture garden by Lynden Whitaker. "It's an approachable and educational experience," says Gallery Manager Abby Daggett. Even more so this holiday season. "They'll be transforming the studio into a Bavarian Christmas village, complete with Santa, Mrs. Claus, and a gingerbread house," she says. Kids and their parents will be thrilled to be invited to discuss their wishes and cookies with the jolly couple.

"From the day we opened, I've been calling it Relief and stream meets cozy and intimate with a splash of grand," says designer Anita Stokes, describing **Balsan River Brewing & Distilling**. And to be sure, it's just that. Particularly down on holidays, when homemade gingerbread and cocktails by the fireplace don't miss the new cold brews, or the holiday cocktail menu spotlighting winter warmers. Expect brewed holiday lights, a roaring fire, and scads of nostalgic touches that compose what Anita dubs its "secret lodge in the Maine woods." quality.

Contrast that woodsy vibe with the cream-cosmic experience of nearby **Seaside Gallery & Gifts**. Cooweers Lisa Bryan Luder of LSART and Holly Rose of Hollywood Designs are each established artists who have been selling their work in the boutique's gallery together, featuring their distinctive styles. "We're constantly being inspired by the ocean in everything we create," Lisa says. Imagine bright sea hues at every turn, including a collection of handcrafted holiday gifts, tree ornaments, an original line of Christmas cards, and hand-painted tumblers. "We want to be a place for people to walk in and series they're in a seaside cottage," explains Holly. "Our gifts are perfect for people who want a little piece of Maine."



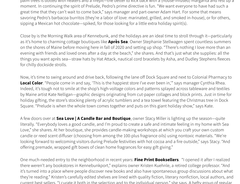
Seaside Gallery's Lisa Bryan Luder and Holly Rose of Hollywood Designs in front of their shop in Kennebunk's Dock Square. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

Making custom framing accessible to all is important to Megan Bliss, owner of **Lower Village Frameworks**. "Framing is a personal and creative process," says Megan, an artist herself. "We're trying to bring a fresh, approachable, and fun vibe to the art world." Her shop's stocked with a wide selection of frames and art pieces, keepsakes and family heirlooms are among her clients' favorite gifts—graduation hats, pet portraits, clay hide-in-one accessories, and other personal collections. "People are excited to pick up their pieces because of how personal and meaningful they are."

In that same group of buildings, Louise W. Hurlburd of **Hurlburd Designs** helps visitors deck their homes in ways big (design services available by appointment) and small (gifts range from the lunch-at-the-way-home-from-work-friendly trimmed in local Kennebunk landmarks). She credits her design vision to years of living abroad and in Maine. "We pride ourselves on an eclectic look that accentuates living by the sea," Hurlburd says. This December, Louise will share that vision during a Christmas decorating demonstration on the first Saturday of Prelude, and with Nutcracker-themed decorations and her renowned holiday tea and Nutcracker painting by a local artist.

Also in that small complex sits **Kennebunk Outfitters**, opened by husband-and-wife team Charlie and Robin Buckley in fall of 2020. "We'd been coming to the area for 20 years every summer, and the store was born from what we saw—people biking, surfing, fishing, and running outside. It struck us as odd that you had to drive far for premium gear," says Charlie. Business has been going gangbusters ever since, and this holiday season, they'll be stocked up with everything from athleisure by Vuori to hiking boots, poles, and running shoes. "We love watching people come in to gear up," says Charlie. "There's an overwhelming sense that people want to be outside for an adventure."

A stone's throw away, Karsten Wilcox also aims to provide a sense of adventure at her gallery, **Kiki Contemporary Art**. "I want to bring art that's unexpected to the area, but that still fits into the history of Maine and its connection to artists," Karsten says. She's planning a lineup of holiday experiences for visitors, beginning with the annual silent auction. All That Glitters, a continuation of last year's Prelude show. "Everything seemed so gloomy with Covid, and people were commenting how happy and bright to look forward to," she recalls. Her response? A space full of metallic and shimmering accents. The show will run December 3–January 23, with an opening reception holiday party on December 4.



Karsten Wilcox's Kiki Contemporary Art, which will host a holiday show and reception this December. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

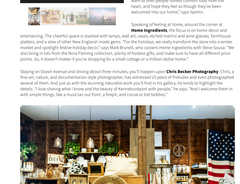
The revelry continues a one-minute walk away at **Podere**. There, the relaxed outdoor seating with life-sized artificial palm trees is dotted with heaters, and a heater-the-better to kick back with a house-infused margarita and rest up a moment. In continuing the spirit of Prelude, Podere's prime directive is fun. "We want everyone to have a good time and feel that's a great time that they can't wait to come back," says manager and part-owner Adam Hart. For some that means searching Podere's bartacular bunnies (they're a labor of love, manufactured, gilded, and smoked in-house), or for others, sipping a Mexican hot chocolate—spiked, for those looking for a little extra holiday spirit(s).

Close by is the Morning Walk area of Kennebunk, and the holidays are an ideal time to stroll through it—particularly as it's home to charming cottage boutiques like **Aprils Sea**. Owner Stephanie Stellwagen spent countless summers on the shores of Maine before moving here in fall of 2020 and setting up shop. "There's nothing I love more than an evening with friends and loved ones after a day at the beach," she shares. And that's just what she supplies: all the things you want aprés sea—dress hats but #black, nautical cord bracelets by Asha, and Dudley Stephens fleeces for chilly dockside strolls.

Now, it's time to swing around and drive back, following the lane off Dock Square and next to Colonial Pharmacy to **Local Color**. "People come in and say, 'This is the happiest store I've ever been in,'" says manager Cynthia Rhea. Indeed, it's tough not to smile at the shop's high-voltage colors and patterns splayed across tablecloths and fabric by Maine artist Kate Nelligan—graphic designs originating from cut paper collages and block prints. Just in time for holiday, Local Color will host a pop-up by Maine artist Jessica Dunn, who's known for her whimsical paper cutouts in Dock Square. "Prelude is when the whole town comes together and uses the glorious holiday show," says Kate.

A few doors over is **Sea Love | a Candle Bar and Boutique**, owner Stacy Miller is lighting candles in her shop quite literally. "Everybody loves a good candle, and I'm proud to create a safe and intimate feeling in my home with Sea Love," she shares. At the boutique, she provides candle-making workshops for those who crave a little more control over candle-or-next scent diffuser is brooding from among the 200-plus fragrance oils using nontoxic materials. "We're also offering a wonderful selection of Christmas-inspired candles and diffusers," she shares. Stacy's also offering premade wax-pours for lovers of clean home fragrance for easy gift giving.

One much-needed entry to the neighborhood in recent years: **Fine Print Bookseller**s. "I opened it after I realized there weren't any bookstores in Kennebunkport," explains owner Kristen Kaehkie, a retired college professor. "And it's turned into a place where people discover new books and also have spontaneous conversations about what they're reading." Kristen's carefully edited shelves are lined with quality fiction, literary nonfiction, local authors, and children's books. "We're also a place where people can come in and just be quiet," she shares. And that's a regular customers has resulted. "I just really want people to read more," adds Kristen. "Reading brings out the best in people."



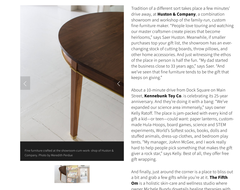
Kristen Kaehkie, owner of the Fine Print Bookshop, stands in her quaint shop in Kennebunk's Dock Square. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

A few steps away lies gastronomic bliss, in the Francesby-way of Maine dishes of **Chez Rose**. There, spouses Kyle Robinson and Yasmin Sarappa. Joon serve classic French fare with a Maine twist—"We want to be approachable and help sustain the economy. "We're the first ocean-friendly restaurant in Maine," says Yasmin. Exhibit A: Chef Kyle's signature duck confit Bolognese, recently became a potlick Wellington when cod became unavailable. Dessert? Chez Rose's Christmas cookies—other winter specialties like his splendid charcuterie and fondues, both ideal for family-style gatherings. "We want to offer people honest comfort food from the heart, and hope they feel as though they've been welcomed into our home," says Yasmin.

Chez Rose's Yasmin Sarappa and Kyle Robinson. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

Speaking of being at home, around the corner at **Maine Ingredients**, Chris Pizzuto is in home decor and entertaining. The cheerful space is stocked with lamps, wall art, vases, etched marble and wine glasses, farmhouse platters, and a slew of other New England–made gems. "For the holidays, we really transform the store into a winter market and spotlight festive holiday decor," says Mark Brunell, who covers Maine Ingredients with Steve Sousa. "We have a lot of local artisans, and we want people to come in and see what they can find." Pizzuto has a lot of other fun plans, too. It doesn't matter if you're shopping for a small cottage or a million-dollar home."

Staying on Ocean Avenue and driving about three minutes, you'll happen upon **Chris Becker Photography**. Chris, a fine-art, nature, and documentarian-style photographer, has witnessed 15 years of Preludes and even photographed several of them. And just as with the stunning naturalist work you'll find in his gallery, the holiday spirit he depicts. "I love sharing what I know and the beauty of Kennebunkport with people," he says. "And I welcome them in with simple things, like a musician out front, a firepit, and cocoa or hot toddies."



Chris Becker, owner of Chris Becker Photography, in front of his gallery. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

A 10-minute drive away, you'll come upon Cape Porpoise, where a Christmas tree fashioned out of stacked lobster traps announces your arrival at the coastal village. Here, you'll also find **Farm + Table**, housed in a big red barn brimming with treats and gifts from small-batch artisans, sources by owners Liz and Jessica Andrews. "I don't want to sell what everyone else does," says Liz. "We want to tell the stories of the makers, craftspeople, and local farmers." Among the shop's offerings are Maine-made ceramics, Maine-made jewelry, Maine-made candles, and Maine-made soaps. Liz's favorite scented candle by Farm + Sea, local honeys and sea salt soaps—all huge hits at Christmas.

Down the road, completely different flavors reign—those hailing from Argentina. **The Lost Fire**, helmed by Buenos Aires–born chef-owner Germán Lucarelli, re-creates the Argentine steak house. "It's a place with an open kitchen to engage everyone, to relax in with wonderful food, to be in the house-style." The mixed grill, a melange of sausages, sweetbreads, and other meats to be shared by the whole table. For the holidays, the kitchen's whipping up Argentine-inspired holiday specials, including a Christmas Eve dinner of lechón, a whole roasted pig. "Argentina is about getting together and sharing a meal, and so are the holidays," says Germán. "This is the place for both."

Year-round, there's always something cozy and intimate about **Earth at Hidden Pond**—a magic spell cast by the owners' dedicated, decades-long commitment to sustainability. Lots of local ingredients, a wood-burning fireplace, and the coziness is dialed up even higher. It doesn't hurt that executive chef Jac Schaller also now turns to heavier dishes. "I love to braise things," he says. He's offering a special Prelude menu, plus a three- or four-course prix fixe menu. But, he adds, "You don't have to get dressed up to come here, but you can. Either way, you're going to have beautiful food, and a time that's merry."

Drive about 10 minutes down Goose Rocks Road and you'll come to the slate-black barn housing **Vineyard Hill**. Owner Ellen Ryan's been a fixture in Kennebunkport for 40 years, and she's been selling her handmade jewelry there since then. This year, they'll once again hold Santa Paws Fest (to benefit Lucky Pup Rescue, a nonprofit helping local dogs). "For safety's sake, this year it will be a hybrid format," says Massage Director Sarah Deering. "With crafts for kids that we take home instead of on site." They're also bringing in a special holiday show by Bird Strong, the nationally lauded group that blends classical and modern music. Shows are on December 10th and 11th.

Tracy Ryan in front of the Vineyard Hill barn, home of her mother, Ellen Ryan's, jewelry. Photo by Lauren Hottinger.

Tradition of a different sort takes place at Ellen's sister's place, **Heaton & Lockhart**, a combination showroom and workshop of the family-run, custom hive furniture maker. "People love knowing and watching our master craftsmen create pieces that become heirlooms," says Sarah Heaton. Meanwhile, if a teacher purchases top-year gift list, the showroom has a wide array of gifts for teachers, students, and anyone else who loves accessories. And just witnessing the ethos of the place in person is half the fun. "My dad started the business 35 years ago," says Sam. "And we've seen that free furniture tends to be the gift that keeps on giving."

About a 10-minute drive from Dock Square on Main Street, **Kennebunk Toy Co.** is celebrating its 20-year anniversary. And they're doing it with a bang. "We've expanded our science area internationally," says owner Kelly Bakell. The place is jam-packed with every kind of toy, from Lego sets to Melissa & Doug puzzles, handmade-made Hoops, board games, science and STEM experiments, World's Softest socks, books, dolls and stuffed animals, dress-up clothes, and bedroom play tents. "My manager, JoAnn McGee, and I work really hard to find a unique pick-up something that makes the gift over a rock star," says Kelly. Best of all, they offer free gift wrapping.

And finally, just around the corner is a place to kick out a bit and grab a few gifts while you're at it: **The Fifth Oak** is a holistic skin-care and wellness studio where Kate Ross and Lauren Hottinger offer a variety of innovative technology in facials, massage, herbal foot soaks, and far-infrared sauna therapy. "It's intimate and peaceful here," she says. "People come in after running around and the stress with a Himalayan salt massage, say, or just to use the sauna. And then they get gift baskets of all-natural products or gift certificates while they're resting."

After experiencing the highlights of what Prelude offers, that sounds like just the kind of restoration you'll need to help you push on through the rest of the holiday season. ■

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