

OUT & ABOUT

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INCREASE FONT SIZE

How to eat at Maine’s hottest summer restaurants without a reservation

If you're willing to dine early, settle for snacks or take a boat, you can still get a taste of these super-busy seasonal spots.

BY ALEXANDRA HALL

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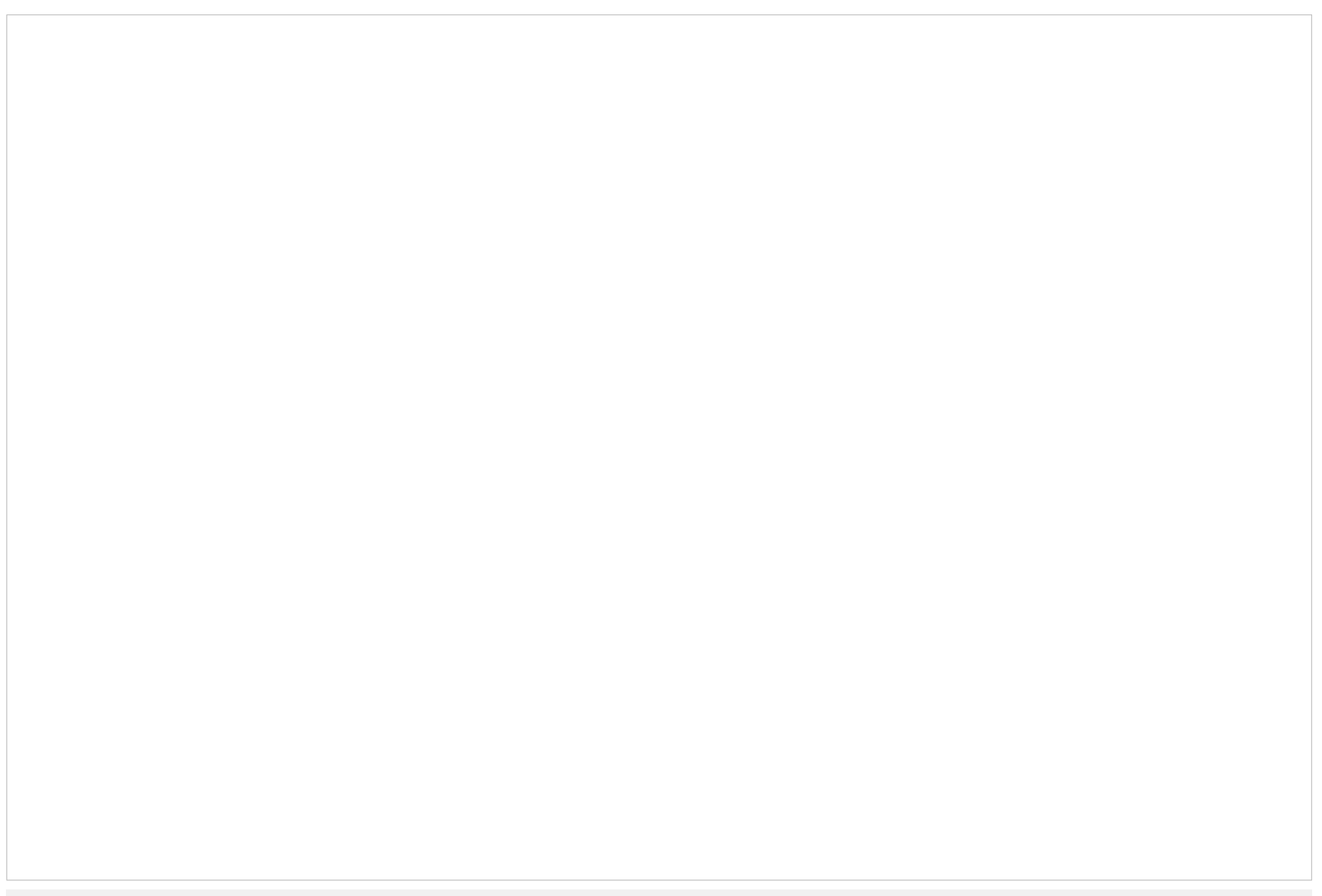
The coveted gazebos at The Well at Jordan's Farm are hard to come by, but there's a place for walk-ins too. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

It's an annual conundrum: The gastronomic gems dotting our state shine brightly enough all year long that, come summer, they attract so many appreciative diners that you simply can't get into them.

Lines snake around entire blocks in some cases. Parking battles are waged. And patience gets tested on all sides of the host stand. To avoid those scenarios, nabbing a reservation is always the gold standard. But at extremely popular places, that can be easier said than done.

Portland's Fore Street, for example, accepts reservations up to two months in advance and, as of May, was completely full on Friday and Saturday nights through mid-July. That said, every night, a third of the restaurant is reserved for walk-ins, which are first come, first served – the walk-in wait list for tables begins when doors open at 5 p.m.

“At the height of the season, people start lining up for walk-ins at 4 or 5 p.m. every night of the week,” said Josh Dore, the celebrated restaurant’s longtime host whose official title is director of first impressions. He advises against arriving too early, though. “It gets a little extreme when people show up before 4.”



Josh Dore, reservationist at Fore Street, answers the phone at the busy Portland restaurant in 2016. *Shawn Patrick Ouellette/Staff Photographer*

Another shrewd tactic: getting insider status as a guest at the hotel or inn that a restaurant may be part of. Some upscale spots, like Kennebunk’s White Barn Inn – its already-coveted tables even more sought-after thanks to buzz surrounding new executive chef Mathew Woolf – makes its reservation book available only two weeks ahead. Unless you’re staying at the property. Inn guests can book dinner at any point after they’ve booked a room, regardless of how far in advance that date may be. Failing that, general manager Daniel Braun offers another idea: “We always encourage walks-ins at our beloved Little Barn,” the casually elegant adjunct to the more formal dining room.

Of course, some restaurants simply don't accept reservations at all, so everyone has the same walk-in status. Unless, that is, you take advantage of a little-known option offered by places like Bay Haven Lobster Pound in Cornish. The ultra-casual fried seafood joint is a frenzy all summer long. “It’s the busiest restaurant I’ve ever worked in,” said manager Chuck Poulin. “But if you have a party of six or more, call a couple hours or even a couple days before, and we can have a table set up.” For everyone else, there are picnic tables to hang out at after grabbing a drink at the bar, to kill the wait time.

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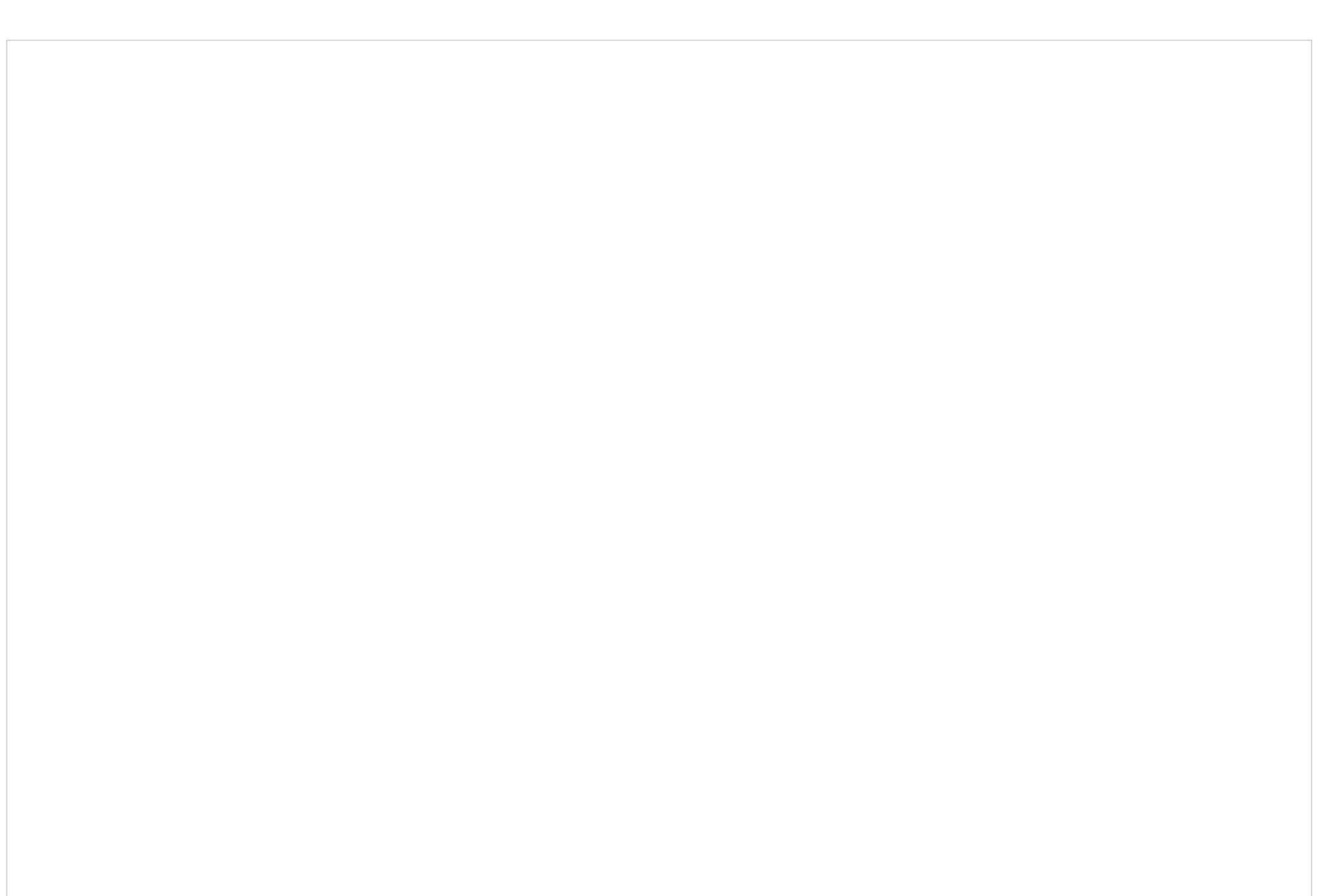


The view at Dolphin Marina in Harpswell makes it a busy spot all summer long. *Yoon S. Byun/Staff Photographer*

Dolphin Marina & Restaurant takes a similar approach – the only reservations the always-packed Harpswell waterfront spot offers are for parties of six to 12 – and even those are hard to come by on weekends. They advise calling at least a few days ahead for that. Wait times for walk-ins average between 30 and 60 minutes – just enough time to play cornhole, or simply lounge at the picnic tables and soak up the ocean views. Or you can order takeout and enjoy your meal out there.

The Well at Jordan’s Farm in Cape Elizabeth has taken that practice to another level. For starters, it only offers prepaid reservations made online for its dinners, which chef Jason Williams serves in private gazebos or at picnic tables. But if guests show up without reservations – which book up weeks in advance in summertime – they’re welcomed to the fire pit for cocktails and light snacks, or to wander the working farm.

One restaurant that doesn't even exist yet is already bracing for crowds. The highly anticipated Twelve, set to open in Portland in early July and led by chef Colin Wyatt (formerly of New York City’s Eleven Madison Park and Daniel) and general manager Daniel Gorlas (Per Se), was already turning away inquiries in early spring. To that end, they’ve set aside the bar for dining walk-ins. “And if you don’t get a reservation,” said Gorlas, “don’t ignore the online waitlist. We’ll keep a very close eye on it and will call as things open up.”



It's as hard to get a parking spot as a table at Harraseeket Lunch and Lobster Co. in South Freeport. If you can, you might opt to go by boat. *Jill Brady/Staff Photographer*

Freeport’s Harraseeket Lunch and Lobster Co., which is perpetually slammed in high season, only takes walk-ins. (Servers recommend arriving between 5:30 and 6:30 p.m. to ensure you eat before the 7 p.m. closing time.) Even takeout can get dicey in the summer, since the parking lot is often as packed as the dining areas. One solution: Switch to an approach by sea; the dock has spots saved for pulling up. So if you needed another excuse to buy or rent a boat, there it is.

Alexandra Hall is a longtime New England lifestyle writer who lives in Maine.

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