

American Way

Celebrated Living | Nexos



Portland, Maine, is an outsized food town in a small package

With a combination of abundant natural resources, longstanding locavore traditions and an influx of culinary talent, Portland has become an unlikely culinary destination



Photography by Erin Little. The open kitchen at Scales Restaurant.

On cobbled city streets, a line of people grows and grows until it wraps around the corner. Often, queues this size terminate with a velvet rope and a bouncer, except it's currently 11:15 on a Wednesday morning, and this one leads to the quaint doorway of Central Provisions, one of the restaurants that have turned Portland, Maine, into an unlikely culinary destination.

The restaurant's dining room—formed from classic brick walls and wide wooden beams—is packed to capacity. A chalkboard announces a foie gras parfait with custard and strawberry, while locals tuck into small plates of toast slathered with bone marrow and a red onion jam that oozes with melted fontina. Van Morrison mixes with the din of eager diners, the swirl of activity taking on the heady feeling of controlled chaos.

“It's like this every day now,” says co-owner and director of operations Paige Gould, raising her voice to be heard. “It's been a whirlwind.”

Five years ago, Paige and her husband, Chris, moved to Portland from Boston. Collectively, they'd cooked at four of Ken Oringer's popular restaurants, but left to plant their flag two hours north in the much smaller Maine port town. Along with the accolades—a 2015 James Beard Best New Restaurant nomination, for one—have come the crowds. Demand has been so high, the couple just opened their second restaurant, Tipo, which serves creative Italian across town. “People are coming from everywhere to eat in Portland,” Paige says. “In many ways, it just feels like there's no better city to be in, or eat in.”



Caption

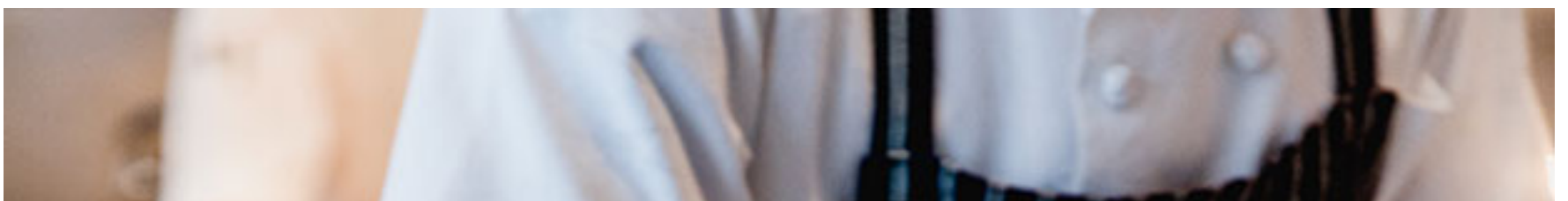
That's big talk, considering the gastronomic shadow cast by far larger players such as San Francisco, Austin, New York and the other Portland. Yet there's clearly something very different going on in this once-industrial city, seated on a finger of land sloping into sparkling Casco Bay and textured with old factory buildings and renovated warehouses.

Portland certainly has the right ingredients for culinary success: a natural bounty from land and sea, a tradition of locavorism and a wealth of homegrown gastronomic talent combined with an influx from elsewhere, improving the quality and variety of food on offer. Sure, you could argue that the city has been on the nation's food radar since at least 2009, when Bon Appétit named it "America's Foodiest Small Town." But in the years since (especially the last three), it's upped its own ante, thanks to a second wave of chefs and a populace that's literally eating it up.

With an official headcount of about 65,000, Portland is currently home to 672 dining establishments (including food trucks), giving it a human-to-restaurant ratio of roughly 96:1. That's more than almost every other city in America (San Francisco can make a similar claim).

Of course, food lovers understand that quality trumps quantity. Consider that Portland chefs garnered eight James Beard Foundation nominations in 2017, and two of those chefs won the coveted Best Chef: Northeast. Last year, the foundation's semifinalists included five from Portland.

But numbers and awards alone don't explain it. What really drives the boom here is a way of life: "The simplicity of living here, and honoring individual ingredients," says Andrew Taylor, co-owner and co-chef of both Hugo's and Eventide Oyster Co. alongside his partner Mike Wiley—they were the recipient of those two Beard awards for Eventide. "People here are averse to big: big corporations, big restaurants," he adds. Taylor, who graduated from Bates College in nearby Lewiston before taking off to work in award-winning kitchens such as Boston's Clio and Seattle's Rover's, says he came back to Maine because of its affordability, quality of life and lack of pretension. "People in Maine keep a blue-collar feel and want to work directly with small farmers, a working waterfront and small fishermen," he says. "That means we get better product than anybody because we're so close to everything. There are no shenanigans in dealing with all the middle men."





This direct access to the region's abundant produce manifests most colorfully in the fall. Tomatoes, corn and prized wild blueberries still roll into restaurant kitchens—and now that the air's turned crisp, so too do apples from Maine's famed orchards and potatoes from its fields. Local seafood is still abundant as well, featuring coveted gems, such as mackerel, cod, haddock and Atlantic bluefin tuna, along with a slew of clams (quahogs, razors, steamers, cherrystones), myriad regional oysters and crustaceans from peekytoe crab to the famed Maine lobster—some of the sweetest and most tender in the world.

The garnet-hued tuna at Hugo's arrives gleaming, perched on a minimalist slab of slate. It's scattered with paper-thin preserved radish, fermented black bean and dabbed with velvety egg yolk. "This just came in from the dock," says Wiley, his hands waving and the curls of his black hair bobbing. His staffers, many wearing beards and plaid shirts, buzz quietly behind him in the open kitchen while he waxes poetic about Maine's pristine waters and soil—secret weapons for him and his culinary peers as they create food ranging from cutting-edge to down-home.

Wiley and Taylor picked up that ethos from their mentor, Rob Evans, whom they worked for at Hugo's before buying the place in 2012. Evans, who had stints at The Inn at Little Washington and The French Laundry, helped to start the culinary fire in Portland when he opened Hugo's in 2000. He and chef Sam Hayward, of the equally lauded Fore Street, are widely considered the town's culinary forefathers.

Fore Street, which started upending the stereotype of fusty New England fare back in '96, is still very much a force in the town's culinary scene. Dinner here is an intricate celebration of locavorism by way of a sprawling open kitchen and a wood-burning oven. On any given night, the constantly changing menu might go from foraged local mushrooms grilled over applewood with native scallops to turnspit-roasted bone-in pork loin.

After Hayward and Evans' initial success, the floodgates opened: Diners were suddenly driving hours and traipsing across the cobblestoned alleys of the Old Port neighborhood to slurp down chilled oysters at Street & Co., an offshoot of Fore Street by co-owners Dana Street and Victor Leon. Michelle and Steve Corry arrived from the Bay Area, opened Five Fifty-Five and wowed with truffled lobster mac 'n' cheese before adding a second Portland spot, Petite Jacqueline. Evans also created Duckfat, a high-energy, casual affair serving Belgian-style fries with truffle ketchup, milkshakes jacked up with crème anglaise and vanilla gelato, and pork rillettes with pickled watermelon relish.

"It's a whole different ballgame now," says Michelle Corry of Portland's current culinary moment. She and husband Steve moved to Maine from Napa Valley, where she'd worked at The French Laundry. "Years ago, we had to put things on the menu

very gingerly, worrying that people in Maine might not get it. Now, we have so, so many adventurous chefs and diners from all over, and local diners know as much about food as anybody.”

Masa Miyake is an emblem and an engine of the trend. The Japan-born, New York-trained chef has been serving artful seafood to Portlanders for 10 years now at Miyake, taking Washoku-style dishes for a Western spin—specifically a Downeast one. A case in point is his iteration of the classic New England lobster roll: Use crustaceans caught within a few miles of the restaurant, broil them with mayo, set them over sushi rice, wrap in soy paper and finish with truffle oil and tobiko. At his newer spin-off, Pai Men Miyake, he brings in chickens and heritage pigs from his own farm, and uses them for his pork gyoza and for Sunday specials like tonkotsu ramen—a delicate pork bone-based soup. “One of the big reasons Masa opened here was to have access to the freshness of foods he couldn’t have elsewhere,” says Courtney Packer, Miyake’s general manager. “When we get uni brought by the fishermen, it’s still alive in its shell.”

Superlative, second-wave offshoots like Pai Men Miyake and others are on nearly every corner: Wanting to dip a toe into casual waters beyond the fine dining of Hugo’s, Taylor and Wiley opened Eventide Oyster Co., which is justifiably swamped every night for its crudos (don’t miss the cured salmon with trout roe, grapefruit and horseradish).



Central Provisions' spicy raw beef salad with Sriracha, cilantro and peanut with lime.

The Taylor-Wiley team has also pushed even further into Asia with The Honey Paw, where chef de cuisine Lars Taylor doles out Vietnamese bánh xèo with braised pork trotters, wild mussels and nuoc cham dipping sauce laced with local maple syrup. In the spring of 2016, Street and Leon opened Scales Restaurant, where you can down a lobster roll on a buttery housemade bun.

Along with luring outsiders, Portland's buzz has attracted talented Mainers back home. Chef Clay Norris grew up in Bath, just up the coast, but left the state 18 years ago to work in restaurants and train in New York and New Jersey. "When I heard what was going on back home, I was so proud, I packed up and came back," he says. He and his wife, Jenna Friedman, launched a food truck dishing out Middle Eastern street food, hooking enough locals to open brick-and-mortar Baharat. The hip-yet-friendly boîte has a street food-meets-fine dining menu; think lamb koftas with pomegranate molasses alongside funky libations like the charred lemon Collins.

The fact that sublime street food is one of the sought-after dining experiences speaks volumes. "Food around here is never treated as precious," says Peter Hale, who co-owns the intimate eatery Drifters Wife with his own wife, Orenda Hale. "It's not about saying, 'Oh, I got a table at such-and-such.' It's not about status or money."

As with so many of the other husband-wife teams running the city's new brigade of

eateries, the Hales moved here from New York, and did so for the low-pressure attitude and the affordability of starting a family and opening a place. “We put off the restaurant so we could have a baby, and opened just a wine store for the first year.” That retail spot, Maine & Loire, is tucked in the back of the teensy bistro.

Accolades notwithstanding (another Beard semifinalist here—this time for Best New Restaurant), Peter talks mostly about keeping things humble. “We’re not here to ‘educate’ people about food or wine,” he says. “We’re here to share what we like, and hope other people like it, too. We want to be a neighborhood wine store and a neighborhood restaurant. That’s what this town is about for us.”

And that right there may just sum up the reason for Portland’s culinary rise: Food that’s inspired by the rest of the world, but establishments still ardently local in terms of sourcing, handshakes and smiles. After all, once the summer crowds retreat, by early autumn

the foundation of enthusiasm comes from Maine itself, and the philosophy ingrained here.

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Food Meets Local Brew

If there’s one thing Portlanders take almost as seriously as food, it’s beer. The twain shall meet in these brewpubs:

Sea Dog Brewing Co.

Order: Broiled haddock with sautéed tomato and capers

Wash it down with: English-style Owl’s Head Light Ale

seadogbrewing.com/portland (<http://seadogbrewing.com/portland>)

Foulmouthed Brewing

Order: The house poutine—hand-cut fries, smoked pork gravy and local farm cheese curds

Wash it down with: A Brat, the hoppy German-style session ale

foulmouthedbrewing.com (<http://foulmouthedbrewing.com>)

Liquid Riot Bottling Co.

Order: Pork belly bites with bourbon glaze and pickled red onion

Wash it down with: Irish Goodbye, a dark and barley-rich stout

liquidriot.com (<http://liquidriot.com>)

Gritty McDuff's

Order: Homemade shepherd's pie

Wash it down with: A frosty, copper-colored Best Bitter

grittys.com (<http://grittys.com>)

Maine Ingredients

Mineral-rich soil and clean seas yield extraordinary ingredients—a boon to Portland's chefs

Apples

100-plus varieties thrive, from well-knowns such as Macoun to the black Oxford, a Maine original.

Wild Mushrooms

Vast forests are home to chanterelles, black trumpets, hen of the woods, oysters and porcinis.

Potatoes

From dark-skinned russets like belrus to the full-flavored Kennebec, spuds are a prime fall staple.

Wild Blueberries

Deep violet and sweeter than their domesticated cousins, wild berries are abundant through September.

Rare Livestock

Various local farmers are raising three greats: belted Galloway cattle, Berkshire pigs and mulefoot hogs.

Grains

Maine's grain harvest, from rye to wheat to oats, makes its way into local breads and breweries.

Seafood

The coast offers lobster, Jonah and peekytoe crabs, bluefish, haddock, mackerel, tuna, cockles, sundry oysters, mussels, scallops, sea urchins and clams, from quahogs to steamers.

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BY ALEXANDRA HALL

September 2017 American Way

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