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Eat like a Mainer!

January 2010 Features

BY: KATHLEEN FLEURY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: RUSSELL FRENCH

Eating out in Maine these days means a whole lot more than cracking lobster shells or digging into a slice of blueberry pie. It entails dining at nationally renowned restaurants, finding dishes that feature farm-fresh Maine ingredients, and happening upon pockets of culinary genius in the least likely small towns. Here are some of our new favorites.



Served in the Pan Seafood, Street & Co.

1. Sole Francaise
2. Mussels Provençal
3. Mahogany Clams
4. Lobster Diavolo
5. **Pork Saltimbocca, Primo**

Primo's most popular dish — sautéed scaloppini of pork served on a bed of roast garlic mashed potato, layered with wilted garden spinach, prosciutto, and a sage, mushroom Madiera jus — is numero uno for a reason. It's comforting yet sophisticated, filling but not heavy, familiar and yet finessed. 2 South Main Street, Rockland, 207-596-0770, www.primorestaurant.com

6. Solo Bistro

The City of Ships has always boasted some tasty taverns, but this chic bistro has taken it up a notch. Chef Esau Crosby, who trained at both Street and Co. and Fore Street in Portland, serves boldly flavored fresh meats and seafood in a sleek space that holds just under fifty people. Watch for the bimonthly wine dinners, which showcase Crosby's international influences. And don't miss the Friday night jazz sessions. 128 Front Street, Bath, 207-443-3373, www.solobistro.com

7. North Creek Farm

"This is a ridiculously cool place," raves chef Brian Hill of Francine Bistro in Camden. "It's right out of a Tolkien novel." Turns out this little farmstand is a hidden gem. An international gourmet food shop that showcases fresh produce from the farm garden (as available), this small establishment around the corner from Popham also serves lunch from 11 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. year-round. It's a great sandwich spot, and the cookies are truly memorable. Whatever you do, don't miss the strawberry-wineberry pie if it's offered! 24 Sebasco Road, Phippsburg, 207-389-1341, www.northcreekfarm.org

8. Hot Suppa

In the mood for comfort food? This small neighborhood joint is a feel-good stop for breakfast and lunch, serving up decadent dishes like sausage gravy over biscuits with eggs and homefries or the much-praised corned beef hash. The chefs here also make a mean Cubano sandwich. 703 Congress Street, Portland, 207-871-5005, www.hotsuppa.com

9. BLT, Blue Spoon

Thick-cut bacon with rosemary mayo, mesclun greens, and tomato on a perfectly toasted sourdough from Standard Baking — simply divine. It's the most popular item on the menu at this neighborhood joint on Munjoy Hill, which has been a regulars' haunt for six years. (It actually ties with the open-faced chicken Asiago sandwich, consisting of a chicken breast grilled over a piece of toasted Standard sourdough with herbed mayonnaise, caramelized onions, a couple strips of bacon, and melted Asiago cheese.) "The Blue Spoon is that perfect mix of friendly neighborhood joint with delicious seasonally prepared food," says Samantha Hoyt Lindgren, of Rabelais Books, Maine's premier seller of cookbooks. "David Iovino is a wonderfully authentic chef with great instincts for comfort food, and the staff is genuinely friendly." 89 Congress Street, Portland, 207-773-1116.

10. Ebenezer's Pub

Any beer lover should know and seek out Ebenezer's, which Beer Advocate magazine has named the number one beer bar in America (and the world) the last three years in a row. Tucked on a side street near Lake Kezar Country Club in Lovell, this converted barn houses about seven hundred kinds of bottled beer and thirty-five more on tap. "You don't sip beer, you gulp beer," says brew aficionado and media critic Al Diamon, also a DownEast.com blogger. And there's a lot of gulping going on at Ebenezer's. "It's a good bar," says Diamon, "and you will have a good time there whether you want to drink Bud pounders or fifteen-dollar exotic aged beers." The food is better than your usual pub fare, from the homemade Texas-style chili to the Chimay Burger with provolone and a Stilton garlic cream cheese. For those not wanting to make the trek to the Lakes Region, there's good news: The owners just opened the Lion's Pride, a new pub in Brunswick — add it to your "Places to Watch" list. 44 Allen Road, Lovell, 207-925-3200, www.ebenazerspub.net

11. Profile: Bob Garver

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CHRISTOPHER GLASS | 300 years of great houses in Maine both public and private in a variety of architectural styles including Colonial, Federal, Georgian, Italianate and more.

GREG MARLEY | In this new book, Mushrooms for Health: Medicinal Secrets of Northeastern Fungi, Greg Marley discusses the world's best researched and supported medicinal mushrooms commonly found throughout the northeast.

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If you're looking for one of the best cups of coffee in the state, Bob Garver's brew is a safe bet. The owner of Wicked Joe's Coffee, a wholesale roasting company based in Brunswick, Garver decided to explore the retail side of coffee and opened Bard Coffee last April. With Garver and partners Jeremy Pelkey and Tom Bard at the helm, Bard Coffee is quickly becoming a local favorite. Garver is the official roaster for the shop, and he has been roasting coffee for more than seventeen years. "Even as a kid, I loved pungent smells and things," says Garver. Now's he's a World Barista Championship-certified sensory judge — one of only five Americans. "But probably more than anything," says Garver, "I like the rituals of coffee, like sitting with my friends after dinner." He's captured a perfect place to do just that. 185 Middle Street, Portland, 207-899-4788, www.bardcoffee.com

12. The Corner Room

This ultra urban spot (it would fit in perfectly in Manhattan's West Village) on the corner of Exchange and Federal streets is the latest addition to chef Harding Lee Smith's dining empire. Following in the footsteps of his Grill Room and Front Room, the Corner Room is an affordable, tasty, cool to see-and-be-seen spot. With a focus on Italian food, and with no entrée over fifteen dollars, the Corner Room provides bellissimo bang for your buck. It's best to mix and match. "We ordered around the menu," reports Farmer's Table chef and owner Jeff Landry, who ate there recently. "The highlight was the Cotechino and good service. I think it is a very dynamic space, and Harding has a real good thing going." 110 Exchange Street, Portland, 207-879-4747, www.hardingleesmith.com

13. Vidalia Onion Rings, Pepperland Café

These tasty rings are worth the splurge, says food writer Kathy Gunst. "Fat, thick, and perfectly crispy with a peppery coating and a soft, sweet onion slice inside, they are served with excellent homemade ketchup or a spicy mustard aioli. Order from the extensive beer menu, and you've got yourself a great treat!" 279 Main Street, South Berwick, 207-384-5535.

14. Truffle Asiago Cheese Puffs, Hugo's

There are a lot of larger concoctions to eat at Hugo's, but these little puffs, featured in the bar snacks section of the menu, shouldn't get passed over for fancier fare. Piping hot, addictively savory, almost like a tater tot with tang, they should put Frito-Lay out of business. 88 Middle Street, Portland, 207-774-8538, www.hugos.net

15. Slates

Slates is a welcomed reincarnation of the old-time favorite that burned down in February of 2007. Known as the "Heart of Hallowell" before the fire, in part due to its presence in the town for more than thirty years, Slates is as popular as ever in its new and improved building. The food is solid — tasty, well-seasoned, and not the least bit generic. It has particularly great salads and snacks, like the warmed brie served with crusty bread. Slates is a busy, colorful place that can seat a hundred, including many Maine political figures — it remains the go-to lunch spot for Augusta's movers and shakers. 167 Water Street, Hallowell, 207-622-9575, www.slatesrestaurant.com

16. Farmers Fare

This is the perfect après-ski or snowshoe stop for a cup of soup (the kale and sausage stew is heavenly hearty), or a sweet treat, like a cookie, cupcake, or slice of cake with hot chocolate or coffee. The newly constructed barn-like food haven also offers house-prepared meals to go, from macaroni and cheese to stuffed squash to meatloaf, depending on the day. And while you're snacking, shop the selection of local meats, everything from chicken, beef, and pork to duck, quail, and even water buffalo, along with Maine dairy products and pristine produce. 3 Cross Street, Rockport, 207-236-3273, www.farmersfaremaine.com

17. Buttermilk Panna Cotta, Bresca

Dessert is to die for at Krista Desjarlais' Bresca Restaurant. The best of the best is the revered buttermilk panna cotta, made with buttermilk, cream, and vanilla, served in a passionfruit broth with a spoon of white pepper orange flower sorbet plus a seasonal touch. "It is permanently on my short list of the best things to eat in Portland," claims Anestes Fotiades, founder of PortlandFoodMap.com and arguably the most traveled diner in the city. "To make this great dessert experience even better, have it with a glass of the Coppo Moscato d'Asti Monclavina from Bresca's dessert wine list. The light floral and fruit notes and a hint of effervescence make them a good pair." 111 Middle Street, Portland, 207-772-1004, www.restaurantbresca.com

18. Truffled Lobster Mac & Cheese, 555

Here's a dish that doesn't need any explanation — shaved black truffles, lobster, cheese, and handmade pasta. Absolute perfection! 555 Congress Street, Portland, 207-761-0555, www.fivefifty-five.com

19. The Touchable, By Bartender John Myers

1 oz. B&B

1 oz. Bacardi 8-Year-Old

1/2 oz. Noilly Prat

1/2 oz. fresh lime juice

1/2 oz. Grade A amber maple syrup

Shake all ingredients over ice and strain into a martini glass. Garnish with a cinnamon stick. Feel your worries melt away. The Corner Room, 110 Exchange Street, Portland, 207-879-4747, www.hardingleesmith.com

20. Mashed Potato, Bacon, & Scallion Pizza, Otto Pizza

Maine's largest city has its fair share of primo pizza places, but this new hole in the wall on Congress Street has paisans talking. Farmer's Table sous chef Mike Rivera swears by this potato pie, and deems it "hands down the best pizza in Portland." Plus it's open until 2 a.m. on weekends — perfect for late-night, post-Port City Music Hall snacking. 576 Congress Street, Portland, 207-773-7099.

21. Steak Frites, Francine Bistro

Marinated overnight in mustard, olive oil, and herbs, this steak is then pan-seared in a skillet



Share Your Maine



Snowbowl at sunset on July 25th with fog moving in.

ERIC JOHNSEN

Gallery »

and finished off in the oven. While it's cooking, a decadent sauce is made with the steak juices, housemade chicken stock, thyme, a little mustard, diced shallots, and shaved garlic. It's served with seriously addicting fries, which are tossed with garlic oil, herbes de provence, and salt, then fried until perfectly crunchy. This is the kind of dish any carnivore will crave again and again. 55 Chestnut Street, Camden, 207-230-0083, www.francinebistro.com

22. Profile: John Ascrizzi

Mainers are passionate about their ice cream, and though a handful of stands have the distinction of being in the top tier in the state, there's one sweet operation tucked into a shop on Route 3 in Liberty that might just take the cake. John's Ice Cream Factory features more than thirty flavors such as quadruple chocolate, raspberry cream, peanut butter crunch, and chocolate coconut almond — all made from scratch by owner John Ascrizzi. Ascrizzi has been in the ice cream business for more than thirty years, previously in Florida and since 1999 in Liberty. He transitioned from using canned ingredients to fresh ones after he moved to Maine, making his ice cream supremely flavorful and often locally sourced. And the change in temperatures outside didn't faze him one bit. "I'm in the ice cream business. I'm always in the freezers, and those are much colder than it ever is outside." The stand closes for January and February (we recommend stocking up on pints beforehand), but the scoops start flying from the freezers again come March. 510 Route 3, Liberty, 207-589-3700.

23. Profile: Maynard Stanley

There's another way to eat out in Maine that doesn't entail white tablecloths and China: the omnipresent church supper/community dinner. And when Maynard Stanley is in charge, it can be some of the best food around. "When we eat out, we really eat outside," explains Stanley, who has been cooking bona fide beanhole bean suppers with his wife, Norma, for nearly four decades. (Their day job is running the pest management company Critter Catchers, based in Owls Head, but do not be dissuaded.) Stanley's suppers typically feature baked beans, pulled pork, biscuits, and blueberry crisp (his recipe won third place at the Union Fair last year) all cooked in an outdoor fire pit. Stanley's secret recipes will have you swooning for beans cooked in the ground. If you're lucky, you can catch a genuine Stanley feast next summer at the historic Conway Homestead (207-236-2257, www.crmuseum.org) in Camden. "Eating outside — what could be better? People would never tolerate something burnt inside, but if you're cooking it over an open fire, a little char — well that just adds to the flavor." Char or no char, Stanley's suppers are some of the most flavor-packed Pine Tree State meals you'll find. 207-594-2112.

24. Mussels. Fore Street

These wild raked mussels from Harspswell, while absolutely delicious, aren't the star of this signature dish at the nationally renowned Fore Street. The real appeal is the broth. A delicious concoction of butter, vermouth, garlic, and almonds, it's the perfect vehicle to consume an entire loaf of the Standard Baking Co.'s scrumptious bread — which comes on the side, of course. 288 Fore Street, Portland, 207-775-2717, www.forestreet.biz

25. 98 Provence

The flamboyant beach town of Ogunquit, with its famous playhouse, exciting nightlife, and fabulous beaches, already feels a little bit like the south of France. But step inside the quaint 98 Provence on Shore Road (open seasonally), and you'll definitely want to start parlaying Français. (You might even get the chance, since so many French Canadians frequent this spot.) "It doesn't feel like a replica of a French restaurant," says cookbook author and food writer Kathy Gunst, "but more like the real thing. It's not the place to go for the latest, greatest, or trendiest, but rather tried-and-true standards like fish stew and cassoulet." 262 Shore Road, Ogunquit, 207-646-9898, www.98provence.com

27. Spring Creek Bar-B-Q

Let's be frank: Most people visit Monson because they're on their way to Moosehead Lake (either that, or they're hiking the Appalachian Trail). But it's high time foodies make Monson a destination of its own. That's because you'll want to eat multiple meals at what is arguably the best BBQ joint in the state. "I was very impressed with the products," says barbecue expert Dennis Sherman, owner of DennyMike's 'Cue Stuff in York. "The food is well made with love by people who care about BBQ. Plus, they have a good variety, and their food is fresh and very authentic." Owner and pitmaster Mike Witham honed his skills in Texas before landing in Monson in 1999. He does all the smoking in his outdoor cookhouse. Pulled pork with tart pickles and crisp onions soaks through soft rolls. Ribs served in aluminum foil are perfectly messy, delectable, and tender. Sides of macaroni salad, Texas toast, and slaw abound. Just make sure to save room for Kim Witham's killer desserts. 26 Greenville Road, Monson, 207-997-7025.

28. Profile: Lisa Turner

Lisa Turner might not be a chef, but she deserves a lot of credit for how good the food tastes coming out of Maine's top kitchens. Turner's Laughing Stock Farm in Freeport provides delicious heirloom tomatoes, baby carrots, hakurei turnips, broccoli rabe, and more to many of Maine's best restaurants. Along with growing produce specifically for restaurants, Turner also has about eighty people enrolled in the farm's CSA. A former civil engineer who designed landfills, Turner views her job — which she has been enjoying for more than a dozen years — as bringing better tasting food to the proverbial tables of Maine. "tastes better, and that's the point," says Turner. "That's why we like the restaurants. We're looking out for each other, and making what we both do better." 79 Wardtown Road, Freeport, 207-865-3743, www.laughingstockfarm.com

29. The Boathouse Restaurant & Raw Bar

The Boathouse boasts one of the best restaurant views in Maine — Rockland Harbor, the breakwater lighthouse, and Owls Head. This indoor/outdoor spot is just fancy enough to host an important lunch meeting and just relaxed enough to enjoy some finger-lickingly good fried clams. The food is simple seafood — the shrimp cocktail, oysters, or mussels are a nice way to start. The fried shrimp and fried haddock make a filling main meal. Also, with impeccable water views from inside the cozy dining room, the Boathouse is as well-situated to take in a snow squall as it is a sparkling summer day. 58 Ocean Street, Rockland, 207-596-0600.

30. Corned Beef Hash, The Purple Cow

If you're ravenously hungry, this hash is for you. A special homemade recipe — with potatoes, cabbage, carrots, and corned beef — this breakfast favorite has been on the menu for all nineteen years the restaurant has been open. It comes in two sizes with varying