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DESTINATIONS

15 Best Restaurants in Portland, Maine

Why this tiny Maine city has such an outsized reputation in the food world.

BY ALEXANDRA HALL

March 28, 2022

If you ever hear anyone wonder why teensy **Portland**, Maine's restaurants have such an outsized reputation in the food world, remember two things: First, those people clearly haven't eaten here yet; and second, the answer lies in a philosophy ingrained in **Maine** itself. The state's proud lack of pretense and its close-knit community of small farms, working waterfronts, and independent restaurants are long-held traditions that predate (and frankly, eclipse) hype phrases like 'locavorism.' And it means not only widespread access to far better food for everyone, but that celebrated fine dining here tends to eschew anything high-concept, and instead just keep it real.

That ethos was amplified by Portland's gastronomic forefathers—chefs like Sam Hayward (Fore Street, Street and Co., Scales) and Rob Evans (Hugo's, Duckfat)—who first got the country's attention back in the mid '90s, and have since opened the floodgates. Now the city's teeming with answers to almost every foodstuff, all so good they'll make your head spin: Luscious barbecue and pillowy, umami-laced pizzas; straight-from-the-sea sushi; unforgettable crispy dumplings; and ethereal donuts made from local potatoes. These days, Portland is a jumble of creative and scrappy spots that make snacking your way around town an utter delight. That said, when you want the complete dining experience of a sit-down-and-linger meal that will haunt your dreams, these are the restaurants to be reckoned with.

Read our complete **Portland, Maine travel guide [here](#).**

This gallery has been updated with new information since its original publish date.



Erin Little

RESTAURANT

Solo Italiano →

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At Solo Italiano, Genoa-born chef Paolo Laboa turns out an impressive menu that changes daily and reflects a perfect balance of both his Northern Italian background and adopted Maine home. The mainstay handkerchief pasta, rolled thin and bathed in the smoothest, greenest, most vibrant basil pesto you've likely ever seen, has become his calling card; but the rest of the menu sings, too. Don't miss the gonfietti, a lightly fried sage focaccia topped with paper-thin prosciutto and creamy burrata cheese, and be sure to try one of each of the gorgeous crudos and salads. The wine list has unique selections from every corner of the boot, and wine director Jesse Bania can regale you with a story about almost every one of them.



Kari Herer

RESTAURANT

Union at the Press Hotel →

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It may be housed in the tony [Press Hotel](#), but Union is very much its own entity and destination. Waitstaff and hosts bearing tablets buzz around the suede banquettes, a lustrous marble bar, and the subway-tiled open kitchen. Union was first put on the map by talented chef Josh Berry, who focused the menu on what he called “enhanced local”—i.e., nearby sourcing met with global flavors and techniques. In the wake of Berry’s departure, the gauntlet that he threw down was taken up by Christian Basset. And his game is equally well-balanced, giving familiar ingredients adventurous twists and turns: The squid-ink bigoli pasta with lobster is straight-up sumptuous, the richness of the buttery, saffron-spotted crustacean cut with sweet acid from cara cara and Seville oranges.



Mathew Trogner

RESTAURANT

The Honey Paw →

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At the Honey Paw, communal tables and mismatched plates show off vibrant New England–influenced Asian dishes like rare beef salad with smoked oyster mayo,

peanuts, and pickled carrots; fried wings with lime, chili, and coconut; and lobster wontons in a seafood curry with cauliflower and basil. Don't miss the fry bread with ssamjang butter, smoked lamb khao soi, mapo tofu, and whatever vegetables or noodles are being wok-fried or wok-charred that day. End with soft-serve or a slice of the ever-changing layer cake. This isn't a great place for a big group—space is tight—so come with one or two other people you can (or hope to) snuggle up to.

Erin Little

RESTAURANT

Woodford Food & Beverage →

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In Woodford's lovingly restored mid-century modern space, Douglas fir accents and orb lighting draw your eye to a multi-peaked ceiling that recalls a vintage Howard Johnson's motel. A long zinc bar suited for drinking and dining is the heart of the restaurant, its central mirror reflecting the buzzy dining room and the traffic lights of the bustling five-point intersection outside. Tuck into a comfy booth and look out onto the illuminated "Hopeful" sign that sits atop Speedwell Projects, the art gallery across the street. Chef Courtney Loreg, a wizard at refining classic bistro cuisine,

consistently nails seasonally inspired salads and pâtés, though choosing between the legendary brisket burger, stacked with smoky bacon, cheddar, house-made pickles, and dijonnaise, and a perfectly cooked steak with warm bone marrow butter presents a welcome challenge.

Courtesy Central Provisions

RESTAURANT

Central Provisions →

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At Central Provisions, chef and co-owner Chris Gould organizes small plates into simple designations: Raw, Cold, Hot, and Sweet. You might mix a few dishes from each, opting to stick to light fare like an exquisite stone fruit salad, lightly dressed with chili vinegar and topped with nigella seeds and crumbled smoked gouda cheese. Or, veer richer with Gould's signature suckling pig (crisped up in brown

butter and served with marcona almonds and cooked apple) and French fries seasoned with Korean-chili spice.

Anthony Dibiase

RESTAURANT

Via Vecchia →

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From the moment you walk through Via Vecchia's ivy-strewn brick facade, this is about as glam as Maine gets—and then some. From the giant crystal chandeliers suspended above dark emerald velvet banquettes and flashes of gold accents, Via Vecchia feels like you've entered another dimension. As for the food, welcome to cosmopolitan Italy by way of Maine. There are rich-as-can-be pastas served in rustic-meets-modernist bowls—a la the fragrant campanelle, studded with local smoked mussels and shrimp, cherry tomatoes, and a piquant n'duja cream sauce. One not-to-be-missed gem: the scallops, equal parts sweet and savory over green lentils and kumquat purée, pomegranate, and sweet leeks. Even utterly un-Italian dishes like the (American classic) Statler chicken taste like an afternoon in Amalfi.

Courtesy Scales

RESTAURANT

Scales →

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Scales, set in a bustling, post-industrial warehouse space on a wharf in Portland's Old Port neighborhood, sports a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook one of the city's busiest working waterfronts. In front of a sprawling open kitchen, ice falls from a ceiling-affixed metal chute—fish packing-plant-style—into a large open bin. The cubes keep the raw bar—a striking display of freshly caught whole fish, including octopus, oysters, and clams—appropriately icy cold. Even with 150 seats and a huge bar open to first-come first-serve diners, reservations are strongly recommended.

Fore Street →

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A multi-award winning Portland institution since 1996, this high-ceilinged, brick-walled warehouse space overlooking the historic Old Port is known for its large, open kitchen and live-fire cooking. A bustling bar opens into the main dining room where, from tables on two levels, you can watch a team of chefs as they man a wood-burning oven, grill, and turnspit fire, open dozens of fresh local oysters, and reach into a glass-windowed vegetable humidor to pick locally farmed and foraged fruit, herbs, and vegetables. Not to be missed are the signature rope-cultured mussels cooked in garlic-almond butter and dry vermouth. You'd also be wise to order the juicy turnspit-roasted pork loin (or anything else that's cooked on the turnspit, wood oven, or wood grill). In July and August keep your eye out for sweet, tender soft-shelled lobster and a tomato and goat cheese tart. The house-made ice creams and a chocolate soufflé cake also have well-deserved followings.

Baharat

RESTAURANT

Baharat →

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Baharat is an ambitious but unpretentious brick-and-mortar boîte, where the attitude is cool (note the garage door walls that stay open to the street in warm weather) and the street food-meets-elegant dishes are hot. As you could fairly expect with a name like Baharat (it translates to "spices" in Arabic), the kitchen here knows its way around a spice rack. Chef Norris employs the Middle East's superstars—a cardamom-laced zhoug sauce and smoked paprika on the za'atar deviled eggs, for example—to deftly elevate nearly every dish. Spicy and sweet abound here, as with the seared salmon with black lentil salad, Moroccan olives, fennel, and sumac vinaigrette, and the house favorite: lamb kofta with tangy tzatziki and pomegranate molasses. And don't bypass the All In, a large-format production—so big it arrives on a sheet pan—of tangy-sweet house-made pickles and an Iraqi flatbread that's equal parts fluffy and chewy.

Courtesy Eventide Oyster Co.

RESTAURANT

Eventide Oyster Co. →

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Favorites at the always packed Eventide Oyster Co. include oysters on the half shell (obviously) served with traditional accoutrements, like cocktail sauce and red wine mignonette, or umami-forward granita-like ices in flavors like horseradish and kim chee. You can't go wrong with any of the seafood: tuna tartare with crispy rice cake, nori, and egg yolk; the lobster roll on an airy steamed Asian bun, with nutty brown butter and a kiss of lemon; or a crispy fried fish sandwich, piled high with shredded iceberg, tartar, pickles, and tare sauce. Reservations are limited here—they will only take them for six or more and even then there are a number of dates they won't accept reservations at all. If you're eating solo though you may be able to snag a seat at the bar without much of a wait.

Zack Bowen

RESTAURANT

Chaval →

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On a charming residential street in Portland's gorgeous West End, Chaval's Iberian-influenced menu offers snacks, small plates, and larger dishes, and you can build your meal in whatever fashion you like. Some favorite tapas include patatas bravas, served with spicy tomato sauce and aioli; deviled eggs with boquerones, queen olives with pimenton, and local wild mushrooms served with a lightly fried duck egg, crisped chorizo, and sherry vinegar. Seasonal salads and larger dishes might include Maine halibut with runner beans, spruce yogurt, and Iberian XO sauce. Save room for the sweets from James Beard Award nominee Ilma Lopez, like Spanish Bar, a chocolate pudding with smoky serrano ice cream, and a drizzle of salty dark caramel.

RESTAURANT

Izakaya Minato →

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At Izakaya Minato the first thing you may notice is owner Elaine Alden's megawatt smile as you line up to put your name on the waitlist. Just a few steps beyond is a small open kitchen where Alden's husband, chef Thomas Takashi Cooke, and his merry band of cooks welcome you with the traditional Japanese greeting: "Irasshaimase!" A half step to your left is a snug, lively bar, and to the right, a large communal table. The denlike front room connects to a quieter, more spacious dining room with table seating, where you can post up for a reliably delicious menu with favorites like okonomiyaki (cabbage pancake) studded with chunks of bacon or local wild mushrooms; crab sunomono (a cold salad of crab, cucumber, and wakame seaweed tossed with Minato ranch dressing); gindara kasuzuke (broiled black cod marinated in sake lees); and mochi bacon (bacon-wrapped mochi with sweet soy).

Pai Men Miyake

RESTAURANT

Pai Men Miyake →

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The sister restaurant to Portland hotspot Miyake, Pai Men is no second-fiddle sibling. The crowds are here for the same meticulous cooking and delicate—albeit more casual—dishes embodying Japan by way of coastal Maine: remarkably fresh and inventive sushi, from-scratch steamed bun creations; and most of all, a glorious roster of ramen that takes the kitchen days to make. Starters like Hamayaki—broiled crab and scallop topping sushi rice, kewpie mayo, sansho pepper, and a slick of eel sauce—deserve their own cult. But it's really the ramen you're here for, and each one is a multi-layered symphony.

Terlingua

RESTAURANT

Terlingua →

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At Terlingua, chef Wilson Rothschild and his team crank out house-smoked meats and Southwest-Mex-Caribbean dishes seven days a week from morning until night. Think: deviled eggs with house-smoked scallops, green olives, and chile oil; smoked bluefish tostadas; guajillo-glazed smoked pork ribs; brisket burnt ends with coffee-agave barbecue sauce; and haddock cakes with spicy aioli. Anything you order will go well with sides of the slow-cooked rosado beans with pork belly or the crispy-edged, honey-buttered, jalapeno cornbread.

Street & Co

RESTAURANT

Street and Co. →

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In a brick building on a cobblestoned side street, Street & Co. embraces Old Port's historic New England graces and gives them a rustic Mediterranean flavor—in both atmosphere and food. For more than 30 years the seafood-centric bistro has been a gem in Portland's ever-widening crown of marquee restaurants, and even in our current fickle food culture, the crowds still spill in to see what the enduring fuss is all about. House signatures like the scallops in Pernod and cream still shine after all these years in the spotlight, thanks to expert sautéing and a silken sauce. If you're looking for a chance to cross something off your culinary bucket list, you're in the right place.

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The advertisement features a scenic background of a boat on a lake with mountains in the distance. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image.