bon appétit

In the Magazine
IN THE MAGAZINE / TRAVEL

Portland, Maine

This year, it's all about the sea. In our second annual reporton the nation's top food cities, Portland, Maine, takes the prize for its fresh seafood, local beers, artisanal bakeries, and the best breakfasts in the country.

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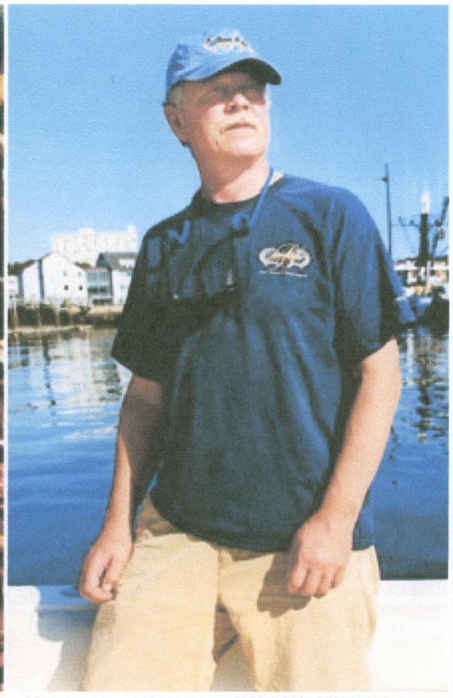

On an unseasonably warm Sunday evening in late April, 70 or so locals of Portland, Maine, allowed three guests "from away" (me, my wife, and our daughter) into an underground dinner party called Deathmatch. With a name like that, I didn't know what to expect. Lobster fighting? Blueberry wrestling? Deathmatch, as it turned out, is an invitation-only event at which several of Portland's talented chefs cook around a theme. That evening, the challenge was Last Meal, or "What would your last meal be?" Lucky guests, many dressed in funereal black, were served 18 courses and lots of booze. For one chef, Last Meal meant caviar and crème fraîche on potato chips. For another, it was handmade tagliatelle with white truffle. But it is the most straightforward dish that I remember best—grill-roasted local Damariscotta oysters served with hot sauce and a squeeze of lemon. I ate one—it was briny, spicy, tart perfection. By the sixth oyster, it hit me: I had to go back to the team at *Bon Appétit*'s offices and make a case for Portland to be named this year's Foodiest Small Town in America.

Why? First, it's got great product, from oysters to fiddlehead ferns. Second, the town has attracted stellar chefs who know how to turn these resources into great food. Third, it even has a signature meal, breakfast, that turns the first fare of the day into a celebration of all this bounty. And finally, it has citizens who expect a lot, and get even more.

Let's start by looking at those stellar ingredients—specifically, amazing seafood—that inspire the city's best cooks. Long before *local*, *sustainable*, and *organic* became industry buzzwords, Portland chefs were using native ingredients, from corn and fiddleheads to oysters and mussels, and, of course, lobsters. "Having the wealth of resources from

farmers, fishermen, and artisans," says Abby Harmon, chef-owner at West End neighborhood favorite Caiola's, "Portland chefs are able to cook seasonally year-round."

About that seafood: You may not know Rod Browne Mitchell's name or his company, Browne Trading Company, but if you've dined out in the last 15 years at any of America's best restaurants, you've most likely eaten his fish. Beginning in the early 1990s, Mitchell, with support from nationally known chefs (including Jean-Louis Palladin, Daniel Boulud, and Eric Ripert), introduced America to such now-ubiquitous ingredients as Maine diver scallops, Maine crab (a.k.a. peekytoe), and Maine sea urchin. Today, from Browne's Portland headquarters, the company continues to be the nation's leading purveyor of ultra-premium seafood.

Next, those talented chefs. When I first started visiting Portland as a college student in the early 1990s, the city had its share of hearty New England breakfasts for fishermen and adequate lobster rolls to placate summer tourists, but exciting, quality restaurants were hard to come by. Now there are lots of them—so many that the local visitors bureau reports that per capita, more money is spent in Portland restaurants than in any other U.S. city except San Francisco and New York. That's heady company, especially for a town of Portland's population (64,000). Street and Co., located on a pedestrian-only cobblestone street, was one of the first great area restaurants. Then, in 1996, restaurateur Dana Street and chef Sam Hayward opened a new spot. At Fore Street, Chef Hayward introduced a cooking philosophy that would become the blueprint for high-end restaurants, not just in Portland but throughout the country—local, fresh, seasonal, and sustainable ingredients, prepared simply.

Today, another outstanding option is Hugo's, which chef Rob Evans and his wife, Nancy Pugh, opened in 2000. Evans's food can be a bit molecular (think foam and smoke), but his best dishes—house-made lamb sausage served with house-made falafel, and olive-oil-poached Casco Bay cod in chorizo and mussel broth—display a refreshingly contemporary approach. This year, Evans became the second Portland chef to win the esteemed James Beard Award for Best Chef: Northeast. (Hayward was the first.) And the best of a spate of newcomers is Food Factory Miyake, an unassuming BYOB sushi joint, where my five-course *omakase* dinner rivaled any that I've found in New York—and at half the price.

But you'd miss some of portland's best eating if you just went to its fine-dining establishments. Whatever you do, don't overlook Portland's third big foodie draw, its diners. Now, I'm no morning person and I'm definitely not a breakfast-is-the-most-important-meal-of-the-day kind of guy—except when I'm in Portland. Maine is the easternmost state in the contiguous U.S., so the sun rises early here—second only, it seems, to the local fishermen. Becky's Diner on Commercial Street, which runs along the waterfront, opens at 4:00 a.m., when salty sea dogs congregate to talk about everything from the catch quotas to last night's Red Sox game. Other morning highlights include the crepe-thin omelet stuffed with meat-and-bean chili and cheese at Marcy's Diner; the country's best bacon, egg, and cheese bagel sandwich from 158 Pickett Street Cafe in South Portland; and just about everything at Hot Suppa!, which is committed to from-scratch cooking. Their corned beef hash is Portland's best breakfast dish.

I thought of all this as I ended my sojourn in Portland—much as I began it at the Deathmatch dinner party—in the midst of food-crazed locals. As Krista Kern Desjarlais of the tiny, much-lauded downtown spot Bresca puts it, "The community here is small but food-savvy and, more than in any other place I know of, strongly supportive of one another." Sam Hayward agrees: "It's a less cutthroat culture of competition than exists in other cities."

I found the clubhouse for this loose confederation of food lovers at Rabelais cookbook store. The selection ranges from new releases to one-of-a-kind gems. (An 1826 first edition of Brillat-Savarin's famous *Physiology of Taste* is signed by the author. For cookbook junkies, that's like a Bible signed by God.) "It's become the town square for Portland's food community," says Kern Desjarlais. As I browsed, I made a mental note to come back on my next visit—and if I'm lucky, I might even get invited to another Deathmatch.