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Welcome to Portland; Now Let's Eat

by Hilary Nangle

Long before *Bon Appetit* named Portland “America’s Foodiest Small Town” in 2009, culinary tourists had discovered the city’s seemingly insatiable appetite for all things food related. When it comes to food, says Sam Hayward, chef/partner in Fore Street, “the audience here is always receptive, if not wildly enthusiastic.”

Hayward should know. Portland emerged on the national table in 2004, when he won the James Beard Foundation’s “Best Chef in the Northeast” title, the same year *Food & Wine* named Rob Evans, chef and co-owner of Hugo’s, one of America’s “10 Best New Chefs.”

The accolades continued. Steve Corry chef/co-owner of Five Fifty-Five (and of the recently opened Petite Jacqueline) made *Food & Wine*’s 10 Best New Chefs list in 2007, and Evans won the Beard Best Chef in the Northeast 2009 honor. This year Krista Kern, chef/owner of Bresca, is a finalist for “Best Chef Northeast.”

Nationally acclaimed chefs and restaurants have made Portland a dining destination, but when culinary tourists arrive, Evans says, “they find that there’s more than just the publicized restaurants.” An oft-quoted, never-verified, and likely quite exaggerated statistic credits Portland for having more restaurants per capita than San Francisco, that other city by the bay. Still, it’s easy to believe when walking around the city.

“Honestly, there are too many restaurants for a city of Portland’s size; there just aren’t that many people to go around. So, restaurants have to be good, have a niche or do something special to stand the test

of time,” Evans says. Despite the seemingly crowded market, despite the recession, restaurants keep opening. And not just a few, but more than a dozen opened, or planned to open, in the first half of 2011.

“A lot of threads wove together to make Portland what it is today,” Hayward says. In the 1970s and 1980s, Portland drew artists and entrepreneurs, gays and lesbians, people who wanted a city experience, but one that was small, livable, quiet, and on the water. “It’s an old cliché, wherever hippies congregate, good food follows.”

Timing played a role, too. “The farm-to-table movement gained traction in a lot of places, but I can’t think of any place where it happened with such intensity and concentration as Portland,” says Hayward, who was practicing and preaching farm-to-table long before it became a movement. “The market, the sources, the farmers, and a growing health consciousness on the part of the dining public all came together at about the same time.”

Portland’s biggest plus is its location: The ocean is out the front door; farmlands are out the back. “It starts with the product,” says Evans. “The seafood here is obviously some of the best in the world. We’ve also got great agriculture with local farmers.”

Increasingly, there are partnerships between chefs and sources. One intriguing new collaboration between Greater Portland chefs, fishermen, and the Gulf of Maine Research Institute aims to find market opportunities for underused seafood products from the Gulf of Maine. Another is the Urban Farm Fermentory, a fermentation center and micro-farm, producing hard cider and herb-infused raw honey among other products. It’s also breeding freshwater tilapia, which it hopes to market to local restaurants, and using the fish waste as fertilizer.

Many chefs have one-on-one relationships with farmers, who might grow specific heirloom crops or raise rare livestock for their kitchens alone. Others



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take it even farther. Lee Skawinski, of Cinque Terre, has long grown much of the restaurant's produce on his farm; Harding Lee Smith, chef/owner of a trio of restaurants, The Front, Grill, and Corner Rooms, is now raising pigs along with as produce on his farm; and others, such as Mitchell Kaldrovich of the Sea Glass restaurant at the Inn by the Sea, have small gardens of herbs and greens.

Other ingredients in Greater Portland's successful recipe are a growing number of specialty food sources, including mushroom foragers; artisan producers of chocolates, breads, farmhouse cheeses, coffees and teas; and retailers who have built national reputations by developing niches for products from caviars to books.

"Portland had this cool, funky food scene in an under-the-radar sort of way, and we thought it would be a good place to open a food bookstore," says Samantha Hoyt Lindgren. In April 2007, Lindgren and her husband, Don, opened Rabelais, one of the country's few stores specializing in rare, used, and current cook books. It quickly became a center for the city's food *cognoscenti*.

Lindgren thinks one of the driving factors in Portland's restaurant success is that the businesses are chef-owned and operated. "If you're working for someone else, you're not as invested emotionally, but when you're paying the bills and doing the cooking, you're more motivated to make it work; you see the bigger picture," she says.

While fresh product is the biggest draw for entrepreneurial chefs, there are others. These include the food community's easy-going camaraderie, as exemplified in such events as Death March, an occasional themed cook-off among chefs, servers, bartenders, and others from various restaurants; the costs of doing business: it's far less expensive to start a restaurant here than in Boston, New York, Chicago, or San Francisco; creative freedom: "Maine is behind the rest of the country in trends, and we like that," Evans says; and lifestyle: "No one eats after 8:30 in Portland, but at the same time we love being home by midnight," he adds. "It lets you have a life, as much as you can in this business."

Add to these draws a supportive community, as shown by events such as Harvest on the Harbor and Maine Restaurant Week; the ever-expanding number

of food-related blogs; and even a company offering food-oriented city tours.

The food community's camaraderie, along with the constant movement of chefs between restaurants both in and out of the city and state "keeps things moving and fresh and interesting," Hayward says. "Farmers have a lot to do with keeping us innovative, with new varieties of crops and varieties of livestock. And of course, we're all reading, we all travel, and we're all looking at the larger restaurant culture." The ideas they bring back push limits in the kitchen, expand diners' palettes, and create demand for new farm products. And ultimately, those young chefs in the kitchen want to open their own restaurants, and the cycle continues. 🐟



Hilary Nangle is a Maine-based freelance writer who developed an interest in food while working as managing editor of *Gourmet News*. She travels throughout the state frequently, updating her three guidebooks, *Moon*

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