

# FOREVERMARK



THE DIAMOND. THE PROMISE.



© Forevermark 2014. Forevermark®, ♦, and The Diamond. The Promise.™ are Trade Marks used under license from The De Beers Group of Companies.

FOREVERMARK RADIANT YELLOW DIAMOND RING SET IN 18KT GOLD 1 3/4CT TW

Less than one percent of the world's diamonds can carry the Forevermark® inscription - a promise that each is beautiful, rare and responsibly sourced.



AUBURN - BANGOR - TOPSHAM - SOUTH PORTLAND - WATERVILLE - MANCHESTER, NH. 800-439-3297

Discover Forevermark® diamonds in exceptional designs at [www.daysjewelers.com](http://www.daysjewelers.com)



Mellen Street

Congress Street

Walker Street

Yordprom  
Coffee shop  
Figgy's

17 Walker St.



# THE 50-Foot Journey

That's how close chef **Natalie DiBenedetto**—who owns the late Fran Peabody's mansard on Walker Street—is to the new gourmet takeout venue she'll unveil in May behind 722 Congress Street—which she also owns.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

"I've always cooked," says Natalie DiBenedetto, sipping green tea at Portland's Yordprom Coffee Shop.

By May she plans to be cooking at Figgy's, her forthcoming take-out restaurant, now under construction in back of Yordprom's building, which she owns. Fig-

gy's will offer skillet-fried chicken and classic sides like mashed potatoes and macaroni and cheese, plus seasonal healthy vegetable choices and a daily dinner salad. Her other signature item will be Korean fried chicken wings.

"I've got the skillet-fried chicken down.

It's just like I grew up with in Missouri—salt, pepper, dredged in flour, that's it. It's taken me a while to get the Korean deep-fried wings as super-crispy as I want, though. *Nobody* wants any more chicken for supper at my house."

Her house is—literally—just out back



## PERSONALITY

on Walker Street, overlooking the job site now turning into Figgy's. She has reduced her daily commute to walking next door. DiBenedetto purchased the pert mansard Victorian known to Portlanders as the Frannie Peabody House when she moved here in 2010.

How do you get from the Show Me state to 21st-century Portland's red-hot food scene? You turn up the burners.

"I cooked all through college"—she has a degree in Speech Communications from the University of Missouri—"and by the time I'd graduated I knew I wanted to do it professionally."

So it was off to the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in Hyde Park, New York, from which she graduated in 1998. Afterward, she went to work farther upstate in Woodstock. "I worked with a man named

Jim Jennings, who was a Texan; he'd worked with Melissa Kelly. She was still in the Hudson Valley back then, and that's how he got started, and later how I got started, in locally sourced everything."

Melissa Kelly is the two-time James Beard Best Chef Northeast award-winner who adopted Maine in 2000 when she opened Primo restaurant in Rockland.

"I met my husband John at CIA," says DiBenedetto. "We were in the same class. In 2000, we opened a little restaurant called Mina in Red Hook. Very small, maybe 30 seats, a few barstools. If you remember Bresca, it was that sort of restaurant. I cooked, and John was up front. He put together a fantastic wine selection. We got mentions in *Gourmet*, *Wine Spectator*, *Travel & Leisure*. The *New York Times* gave us a

mention. There are a lot of really rich people with second homes in the Hudson Valley. One time, Annie Leibovitz came in with Susan Sontag. Red Hook didn't look like much back then, but if you drove around you'd see

**"People were shopping at the farmers' market in high heels with Hermès bags!"**

these amazing houses. I went back to Red Hook and Rhinebeck for a visit last fall. People were shopping at the farmers' market in high heels with Hermès bags!

"We ran Mina for five years. In those days, being locally sourced was a lot of work. There was only one place to get my chickens, one place with cows. I'd have to drive around to one guy for my potatoes and another for my squash blossoms. It was exhausting."

Mina closed in 2005. The DiBenedettos moved on to Milan [locally pronounced 'my-lin'], another tiny upstate town. "We took over a little diner that had been there forever called Another Roadside Attraction, and we renamed it Another Fork in the Road. The menu was 'locally sourced diner,' we made everything from scratch. It was mobbed on weekends. We were a diner, but Philip Seymour Hoffman ate there."

By then the pair lived on a farm with acreage, garden, and critters—dogs, cats, chickens—the whole homestead. Their son Basil was born.

"Then my husband died." Natalie's voice is quiet.

Life as it had been was overturned. Then she rallied and made the decision to find a fresh start.

"It was time to downsize. I sold the farm." She laughs. "To one of those fancy city people! And I turned the diner over to my business partner."

How did this lead to the next leg of her journey, 282 miles to Portland?

"My husband and I had visited Portland back around '98 or '99. We ate at Fore Street and at a place called Gabriel's [on Middle Street, now the site of East Ender]. We thought it was kind of





a cool city. So in the summer of 2009, after everything had hit the fan, I drove up here. Arlin [Smith] had just started working at Hugo's. Thanks to his recommendations, I had a great dinner, a great stay, and I started considering the possibility of living here. I started bringing my son up for visits and checking out real estate. I got *really* lucky on finding my house.

"My mother took one look inside and she said, 'You're going to have get rid of all your furniture.' I have all modern stuff. But you know what? It all works."


In the four years since she moved into the Frannie Peabody House, Natalie DiBenedetto, who is now 40, has set about becoming a Portlander. She's restored the perennial garden in her yard. "I love this house, but my only regret is there's too much shade for vegetables." She acquired 722 Congress Street with Yordprom Coffee Shop as her tenant and go-to java joint. Her son Basil ("He's named for Basil Fawlty, really!") is now a third-grader at Waynflete.

"We do this thing where we hit the road and adopt a town. We've done Camden, Rockland. Ellsworth turned out to be surprisingly fun. Damariscotta—what a great place. I could live there. We spent a week last summer in Skowhegan. But I think if I drag my son up Bradbury Mountain one more time..."

Like countless West-Enders, she's become provincial about dining out. "There are so many great places right in the neighborhood! We love Pai Men, Boda, Congress Bar, Ruski's. We go to Empire. But you know where we go all the time? Hot Suppa—I love that place! Basil always wants the burger, and I'll have oysters while he eats. Dollar oysters!

"One of the first things I did when I started in on my place was talk to those guys [Moses and Alec Sabina, owners of Hot Suppa] and to Leslie [Oster] at Aurora, to reassure them I'm absolutely not competing with them. My food's not going to be fancy. No fridge cases, no prepared and packaged. You'll just walk up to the counter and there'll be the soup of the day to ladle, side dishes scooped from the pots, chicken. That's it.

"It's going to be a lot of work. Opening a restaurant is work. We'll see how it goes. One of the things I liked about having a diner was the line. I can work the line for hours. I hate prep, ordering. But set up a row of tickets in front of me and I can go all day." ■




# Pedro's

Live Salsa Music—4th  
Friday of the Month!


Lunch • Dinner • Drinks

Open Year Round  
Daily Happy Hour

207-967-5544  
PedrosMaine.com  
181 PORT ROAD, KENNEBUNK



*Superb Food*  
open year round for  
lunch and dinner  
pier77restaurant.com  
207-967-8500



*See. Smell. Taste. Hear. Feel.*  
**PIER 77 & THE RAMP**  
*When all the senses get to go out.*