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Good Old Fashioned Holidays

As the holidays approach, downtown becomes a festive destination.

BY OLIVIA GUNN

Desserts are a perfect ending to any meal or night on the town. But if you happen to eat dessert *first*, fear not, The Bar of Chocolate has happy hour.

I've come to meet up with a college friend for chocolates and cocktails. It's the start of happy hour, and drinks and desserts are all six dollars. She orders a cosmo, and I take a risk with a key lime pie.

Before we get into 'Olivia and Emily: A College Memoir,' our drinks arrive and we're ready to order sweets—chocolate berry torte and raspberry cheesecake. Stop, I know. Did I fall on the cobblestones and end up in heaven?

My key lime pie cocktail tastes like a slice of perfection, and the crusted rim is just the detail I was looking for. Emily can hardly finish her cosmo and asks for a glass of water. Not only are the drinks sweet, they're strong.

The bar starts filling up as a group of bros waltzes in. They shy away from sitting nearby, and it's clear they were just as intrigued by the promise of chocolate as we were.

We finish up our catch-up, pay up, and agree that this hits the spot. What better way to analyze exes, bad parties, and stupid mistakes than with dessert?

SPARKLING NEW OASIS

"What's that place?"

"I've been there."

"Okay, what about *that* place? That place looks good."

"We've been there."

"Oh, well, there's—"

"Been there, too."

You can imagine how hard it's become for our friends and us to find a new spot that pleases everyone. Tonight we make our way from Ruski's in the West End down Congress, through Old Port, and end up on the East End, for some an uncharted territory.

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PORTLAND AFTER DARK



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Out & About

On the way up Munjoy Hill, we pass Ma-ma's Crowbar, which only takes cash, and The Snug, a spot our friends wish to avoid, and wind up at the top. "Lolita?"

"Looks too good to be true..."

From the crisp exterior, Lolita has the glow of your own mama's kitchen if she had a fully stocked bar. Yes, please! The four of us shuffle in, our cheeks rosy from the chill, and take the remaining seats at the bar. It's about 7 p.m. and all tables are reserved, but the bartender welcomes us with the wine and cocktail menus.

"What's your favorite red?" He suggests the Lagrein; it's Italian, dark, but subtle and light.

My companions order Old Fashioneds that arrive on icebergs rather than rocks. The boys are quite impressed and decide they need to invest in an ice maker and pick.

Lolita is a tight squeeze with little standing room, so if you find seats you're lucky, but if there is a wait, it's worth it. After two rounds, we head back into the chill with warmed, flushed faces knowing Lolita will always offer a cozy seat in the East.

THE PLAY'S THE THING

We're 10 minutes late, parked three blocks away, and my pumps were a really bad idea. "Why didn't you just park at the apartment? I could have changed my shoes."

"Why did you wear those shoes?"

Parking. The task that has brought a sudden storm cloud to many happy couples' evenings. It's the argument that always arises when running late for a show, dinner, or party. Tonight it's **Portland Stage's** produc-

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tion of *Brighton Beach Memoirs* that may be interrupted by the Olivia and Philipp show.

We rush to the box office, my feet blistered and cramped, to find they *do* permit late seating. "Oh, thank you, we're so sorry." The attendant nods and with a disapproving frown hands us the tickets. "We're not usually late." She smiles at my obvious lie.

We climb the stairs, which by this point might as well be Katahdin, and make our way to the back of the theater. There are few empty seats, but the theater is small enough that even from the back row you can see the entire stage perfectly.

By intermission, all is well between us again. Leave it to Neil Simon to bring about hugs and apologies. Something about sharing a laugh with over 200 people keeps the tension at bay.

The line for coffee and cakes is long, but we're headed out afterward, so we enjoy the people watching instead. It's a well-dressed audience; one woman even wears an evening gown. Portland's theater scene may be small compared to the lights of Broadway, but no one can claim we don't have city class.

The show warrants a standing ovation from some; audiences more and more often feel this is expected of them, but it isn't. Though this performance was very good, unless you are entirely moved and literally swept to your feet, a standing ovation is not required. We notice several older couples who know this and once everyone has been re-seated, we rise and leave behind them.

The walk back to the car is much less painful, and with the promise of a foot rub and a "You were right," the drama ends and the curtain drops on that argument.

PIANO BREAK

After spending the afternoon at **Longfellow Books**, **Sherman's**, and **Yes Books** Christmas shopping for the perfect titles to give our loved ones—a Thoreau for Ilya, Lily King's *Euphoria* for Jill, and the latest *Olivia the Pig* for little Paige—we're ready for an evening all about us. The Old Port is perfect for holiday shopping, but when you've got family in every state and two continents, you soon learn to simplify the giving experience. "Books. We'll do books this year."

After our list is checked, we're ready to give ourselves the gift of a break and soon find ourselves at **MJ's Wine Bar** in 1 City

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Center. The giant, marbled bar is nearly empty but for the young woman and her man sitting at the very end. She wears a fitted red dress and he's more casual in t-shirt and jeans. The few other patrons sit far apart, one couple on the couch keeping close and an older man opposite them with his first glass of wine.

For a minute we're strangers, but we approach the couple with friendly hellos. Colleen recognizes Fil and me and she introduces us to Jared. She's performing tonight as part of MJ's weekly event, "88 Keys and a Lady In Red." Each Wednesday, she and two other female vocalists trade off singing jazz favorites.

Colleen's pianist, Kyle Friday, arrives and she saunters to the piano. As we sip Malbec and snack on cheeses, Colleen swoons us with renditions of Billie Holiday and Etta James.

The sounds of Colleen and the piano beckon more lone drinkers into the wine bar. Soon we're all sitting in silence, comforted by the wine and sultry lullabies. It's the perfect Wednesday night for the season, to warm up with a bottle of red and some of the sweet sounds of Portland. ■

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