



Eat, Drink,

It's the official sign that winter is over.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Say what you will, **Maine Restaurant Week** buzzes when the calendar flips to March. It catches you when you may be hibernating just a little too much, hooks you with *prix-fixe* menus that surprise with fabulous meals in restaurants you might not otherwise consider. It's a chance for dinner at **Tempo Dulu** or **Back Bay Grill** for \$45.

Or how about a southern-style feast starting with shrimp and grits followed by tenderloin tips with mashed potatoes and

gravy, finished off with apple cobbler for \$25 at **Hot Suppa**?

This year, Maine Restaurant Week (MRW) is March 1 to 12, with additional ticketed events taking place just before and after those dates. Dozens of restaurants will offer three-course dinners for \$25, \$35, \$45, or \$55, some with additional lunch specials. It's not just for Portland—**Fishbones American Grill** and **Fuel** in Lewiston are regular participants, and so are **40 Paper**, **Natalie's**, and the **Hartstone Inn** in Camden, to name a few out of town.

"What we hear over and over," says Jim Britt of G Britt PR, the founders (in 2009) and curators of MRW, "is that Maine Restaurant Week is different from other cities. It's a *celebrate* event, not a *deal* event. We don't require just one price for a three-course dinner. It's four-tiered."

To participate, a restaurant pays a registration fee (\$495) in exchange for a (self-managed) page on the MRW website to display the menu(s), hours, and prices; color posters; color cards to include in guest checks; and inclusion in MRW promotions



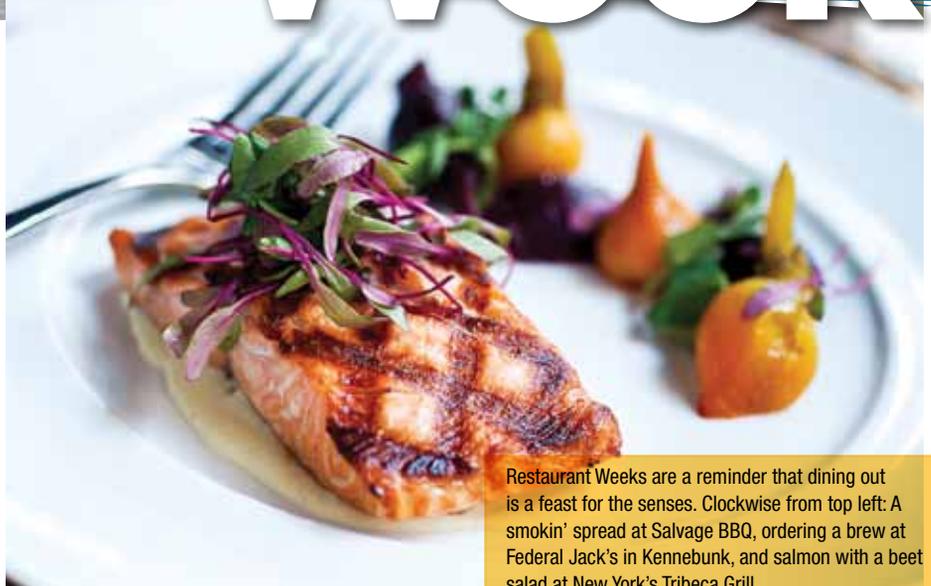
Restaurant Week

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SALVAGE BBQ - MATTHEW ROBBINS; COURTESY FEDERAL JACK'S; COURTESY TRIBECA GRILL NYC

including social media and a phone app. The fee also contributes to MRW's social conscience: "To date, MRW has donated more than \$60,000 to Preble Street, United Way, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southern Maine, and others," according to the website.

PERCEPTIONS

"Restaurant Week has always been a great value for us," says Josh Hixson, who co-owns, with Tara Barker, the restaurants **3 Crow** in Rockland and **40 Paper** in Camden. "We see our business more than double



Restaurant Weeks are a reminder that dining out is a feast for the senses. Clockwise from top left: A smokin' spread at Salvage BBQ, ordering a brew at Federal Jack's in Kennebunk, and salmon with a beet salad at New York's Tribeca Grill.



It's all about friendly neighborhood hot-spots. From top: bustling at Local 188, a gorgeous grilled sandwich at Bayside American Cafe, and dinner at 3 Crow in Rockland.



during it, and it's an opportunity for guests to visit us and get a great three-course dinner for phenomenal value.

"It's also really difficult for us to advertise as broadly and effectively as MRW is able to do. I've seen coverage for Restaurant Week on TV, radio, print, and internet. The Rock Coast (what we call Rockland, Rockport, and Camden) has so many great restaurants (92 at last count) that I would love to see more local participation."

Although Portland has many eager participants, a good number of which sign up every year, there are others who apparently aren't inclined. Only one of Zagat's supposed top 10 restaurants in Portland this year—**Timber**—had signed up for MRW at press time. It would be hard to make a case that Zagat's analysis matters, though, considering that MRW has some of Portland's most successful restaurateurs signed up as repeat participants: Harding Lee Smith with all three of his Rooms restaurants plus Boone's; Jay Villani is in again with Sonny's, Salvage BBQ, and Local 188; and Michelle and Steve Corry have signed up 555 and Point 5 Lounge.

So is MRW a must—or not?

"I think it may be a little bit of both," says chef Peter Sueltenfuss, who has cooked locally at Miyake and Fore Street, and was execu-

tive chef at Grace before opening his gourmet Otherside Deli on Veranda Street last year. "From an owner's perspective, it's a pretty hefty entrance fee, and then you're obliged to offer a discounted three-course menu on top of it. It's very well promoted, and I realize promotion does cost money" and that the arrangement can be beneficial.

"It definitely brings people out, no question," he says. "But a lot of the people, you may only ever see once. At Grace, we didn't participate in the official restaurant week, but we ran a special menu then, and the owner set aside a percentage of profits and donated it to No Kid Hungry."

THEY'RE EVERYWHERE

There are restaurant weeks in every major city and quite a few non-major ones, too, like Savannah, Annapolis, Indianapolis, Hoboken, and Raleigh.



FROM TOP: LOCAL 188 - MATTHEW ROBBINS; BAYSIDE AMERICAN CAFE - JOAQUIN MALLMANN; 3 CROW - PHOTO BY ERIN LITTLE

Maine Restaurant Week 2016

1912 Cafe, Freeport

3 Crow Restaurant and Bar,
Rockland

40 Paper, Camden

Azure Cafe, Freeport

Back Bay Grill, Portland

Bayside American Cafe
(Formerly Bintliff's), Portland

Bayside Bowl, Portland

Bonobo Wood Fire Pizza,
Portland

**Boone's Fish House & Oyster
Room**, Portland

**The Brunswick Hotel and
Tavern**, Brunswick

Bueno Loco, Falmouth

Casa Novello, Westbrook

Celebrity Bar & Grill, Bangor

Congress Squared (C2)
Restaurant, Portland

**Corner Room Italian Kitchen
and Bar**, Portland

Dauids, Portland

Dauids 388, South Portland

Dauids Opus Ten, Portland

DiMillo's, Portland

East Ender Restaurant & Bar,
Portland

Eve's at the Garden, Portland

Federal Jack's, Kennebunk

Fish Bones American Grill,
Lewiston

Five Fifty-Five, Portland

Front Room, Portland

Fuel Restaurant, Lewiston

The Good Table, Cape Elizabeth

Grill Room, Portland

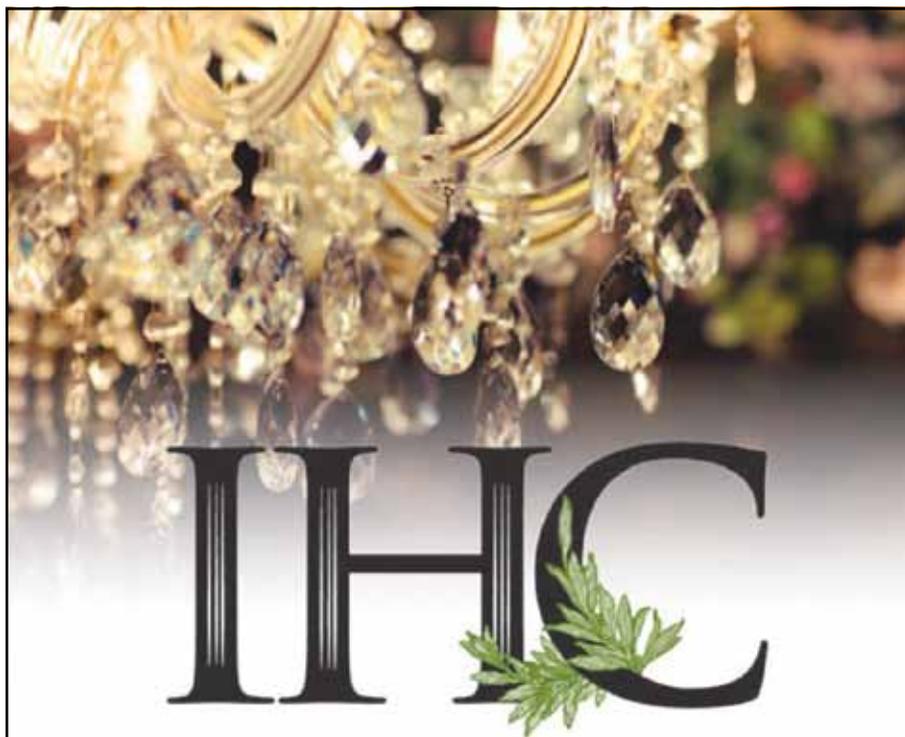
Hartstone Inn, Camden

Hot Suppa, Portland

Linda Bean's Maine Kitchen,
Freeport

Local 188, Portland

Macs Grill, Auburn



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HUNGRY EYE

TIOA's composed magic and, below rotisserie chicken at Timber Steakhouse.



The concept was invented in New York City in 1992, where it's a much larger and more regimented affair. There are now two restaurant weeks there per year—one each in winter and summer.

“This winter, we have 372 restaurants participating, serving 34 cuisines in 41 neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs,” says committee chairman Tracy Nieporent. He and his brother Drew Nieporent are legendary restaurateurs in New York's competitive dining scene, and seats at their Nobu, Tribeca Grill, and Batard restaurants are in hot demand year-round.

In New York, restaurants don't just sign up the way they do here—they have to apply and undergo rigorous screening. “There are 14 criteria” to be met for a restaurant to be accepted on their restaurant week roster, “which include Zagat and other culinary ratings, critical press/reviews, critically acclaimed chef/owner, and notable affiliations.” Nieporent declined to disclose the registration fee.

The set three-course meal prices are sur-



Natalies at Camden Harbour Inn, Camden

Point 5 Lounge, Portland

Ri Ra Irish Pub, Portland

Royal River Grill House, Yarmouth

Saltwater Grille, South Portland

Salvage BBQ, Portland

Sea Dog Brewing Company, Topsham

Sea Dog Brewing Company, Bangor

Sea Dog Brewing Company, South Portland

Sea Glass Restaurant, Cape Elizabeth

Sebago Brewing Company, Portland

Sebago Brewing Company, Scarborough

Shipyard Brew Pub, Eliot

Sonnys, Portland

Sur Lie, Portland

Tempo Dulu, Portland

Timber Steakhouse & Rotisserie, Portland

TIQA, Portland

Tuscan Brick Oven Bistro, Freeport

Twenty Milk Street, Portland

Union Restaurant, Portland

Visit MaineRestaurantWeek.com
for updates to this list

FROM TOP: COURTESY TIQA; MEAGHAN MAURICE

prisingly modest for New York—\$38 for dinner, \$25 for lunch—which is lower than some of the MRW menus here.

The prices, says Nieporent, represent “a genuine value. At the best of times, restaurants hope to make a dime on the dollar—that’s not much, but if you attract a healthy volume of guests, you have a lot of dimes. After every Restaurant Week, we do a thorough review of the results.”

Maybe so, but a 35-year resident of New York’s Soho neighborhood who dines out at every winter NYC Restaurant Week says, “I often feel anger and apathy from the kitchen. Last year we went to Lafayette, and I thought the food was cookie-cutter prepped, with uninspired, skimpy portions. And the wait staff

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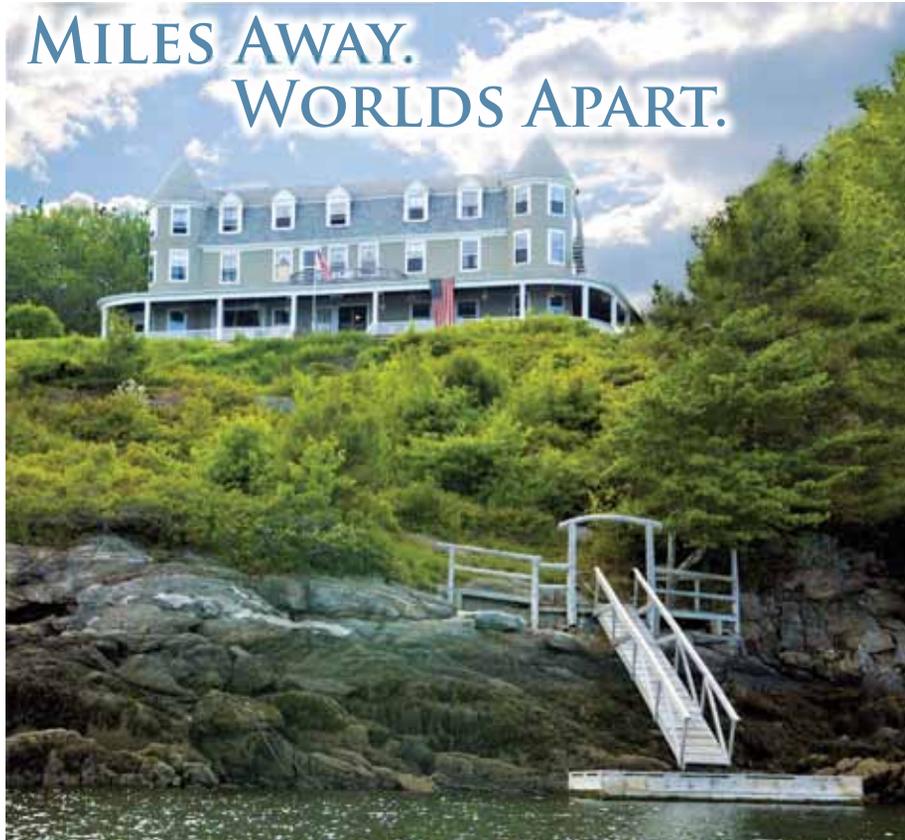
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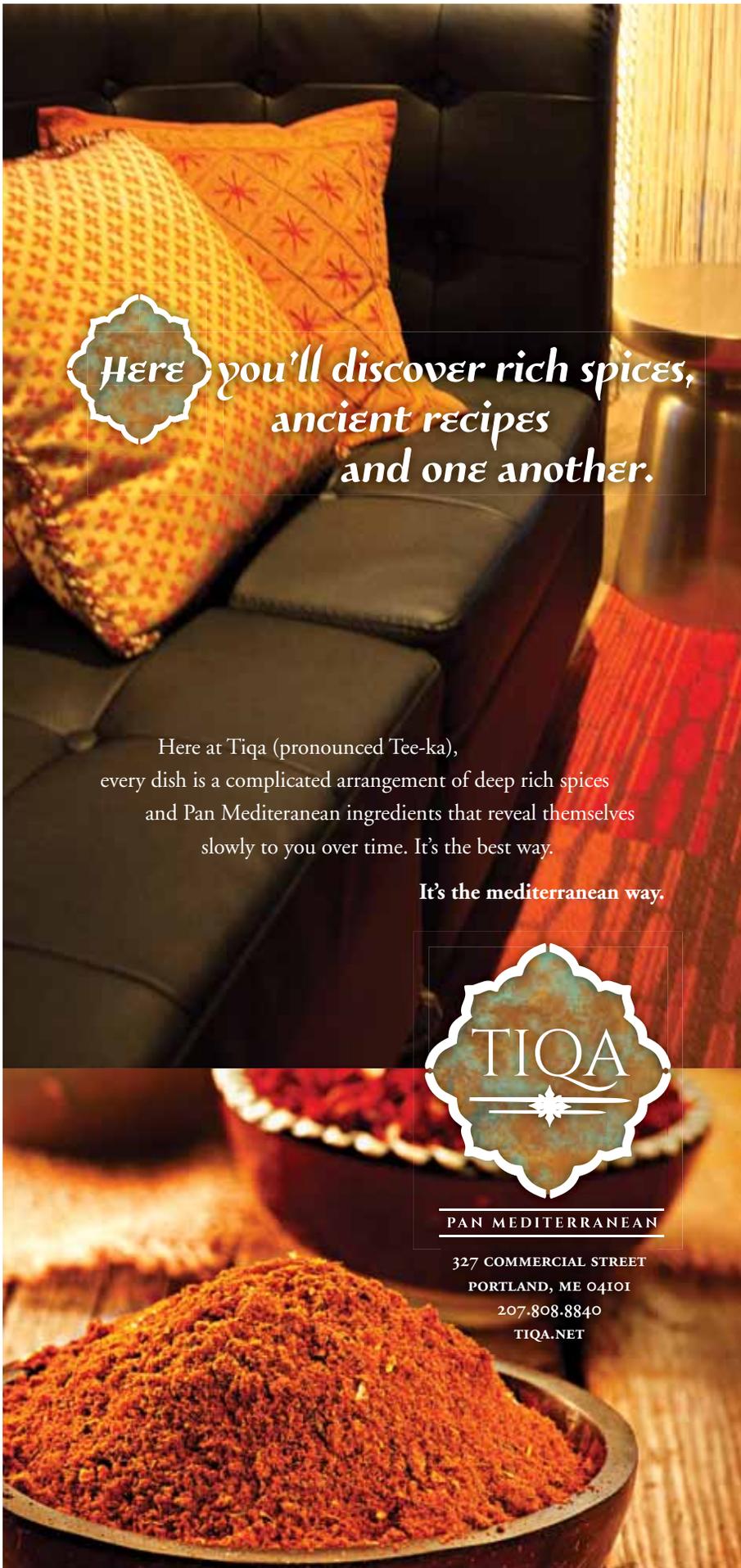
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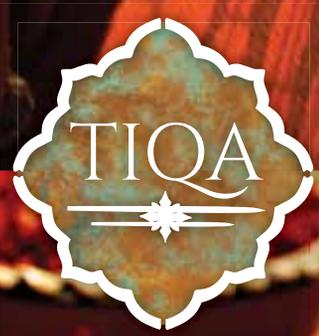
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HUNGRY EYE

is barely able to suppress annoyance because most of the RW customers are bottom-feeder bargain hunters, and lousy tippers on top of an already reduced price bill.”

A Maine chef reports a similar experience at Boston’s version, too.

“I’ve been to Boston’s restaurant week,” says Shanna O’Hea, co-owner and co-chef at **Academe Brasserie** at the Kennebunk Inn. “I went to L’Espalier for lunch, which was very good. I think what’s good is that it gets people to try restaurants when they feel like they’re getting a deal. However, I think



Packing heat: Bueno Loco in Falmouth serves up grilled sausages and peppers (top) and an assortment of prettied-up tacos.

the experience may be very different when it’s not a busy ‘turn & burn’ week. I could tell from watching the waiter at this fine-dining establishment that the more affordable menu changed his service standard.”

It’s worth noting that Maine’s Restaurant Week doesn’t inspire such complaints about the food or service. And that Academe is itself an enthusiastic repeat MRW participant. (O’Hea and her husband are to be forgiven for having “had to pass this year,” though, in order to be “guest chefs on a Holland America cruise.”)

SOUTHERN STYLE

If the New York restaurant week model sounds too structured for Maine, Charleston’s restaurant week is by contrast very laid back.



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“We’ve got a lot of restaurants—and we’ve got a lot of foodies,” says Kathy Britzius, executive director of the Greater Charleston Restaurant Association. Holding restaurant week in winter (this year January 6 to 17) “really helps a slow time of year.” There is a second restaurant week in the summer.

Membership in the GCRA is \$300 per year; participation in the January week is an additional \$300, plus \$250 worth of gift cards for the association to hand out as promotion for the week. “We have about 140 restaurants participating.”

Charleston’s bit of learned wisdom: “In the beginning, we structured the meal prices, but now we let each place do its own thing. This works so much better.” As a result, you might have a two-course lunch for \$12 at the Lowcountry Bistro, \$15 cocktail/food pairings at The Gin Joint, or a three-course dinner at Circa 1886 for \$45.



Fried plantains at Sonny’s pair wonderfully with a juicy Jaycito cocktail.

BACK HOME

Tiqa had only been open a few weeks when it signed up for its first restaurant week in 2015. “We had a great time,” says general manager Patrick Morang. This year, they’re signed up for lunch and dinner, and dinner means an exotic three-course Mediterranean feast for \$35.

“I was at **David’s** for nine years before I came to Tiqa, so I’ve been in [MRW] from the get-go.” Morang is a fan. He’s got Tiqa signed up for “all three special events this year.” There’s the extremely popular breakfast cook-off event at **Seadog Brewing Co.** in South Portland on February 28, which serves as the official kick-off of the week; a

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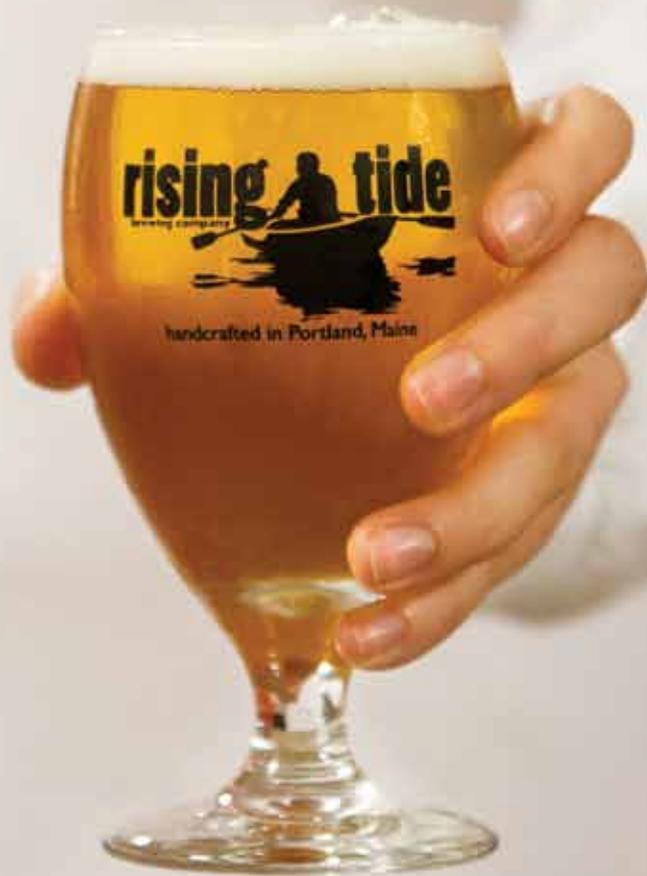
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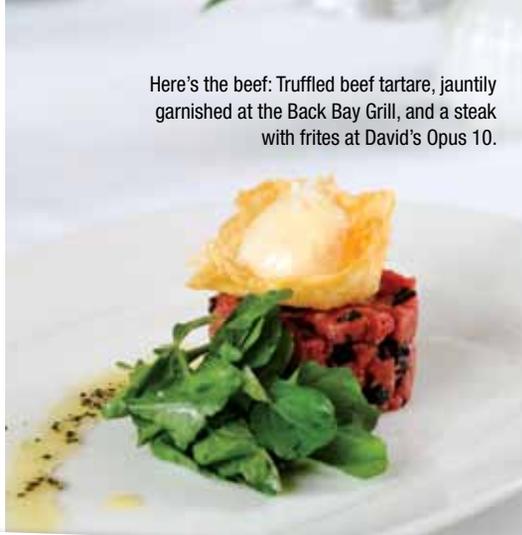
coffee-and-dessert-pairing event at **Coffee By Design's** Diamond Street headquarters on March 13; and a new "Spirit Quest"—a "wandering" tasting tour in the Old Port on Sunday, February 28.

"The Quest is going to be really fun," says Morang. "You get a map when you buy a [\$35] ticket, and you'll go to participating restaurants for a cocktail and food pairing. At the designated time, everyone meets at the concluding place to vote and the winner will be announced."

"The idea of the Quest is to bring the 'signature event' we'd been holding at a single venue back to having it take place *in* the restaurants," says Jim Britt. "Participants can roam around on their own once they have the list of participating places."

Well, aren't we all ready for a little fun right now? And isn't restaurant week a pretty good excuse to emerge from hibernation? ■

Here's the beef: Truffled beef tartare, jauntily garnished at the Back Bay Grill, and a steak with frites at David's Opus 10.



FROM TOP: COURTESY BACK BAY GRILL; COURTESY DAVID'S

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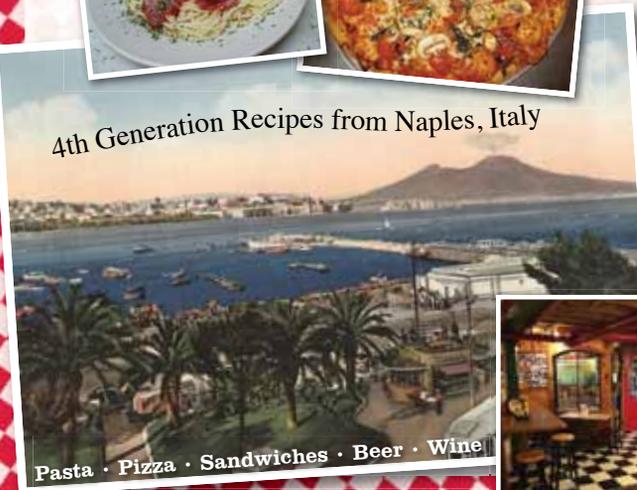
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