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Menu-Busters Anonymous

Dare to call the shots? When you're craving a dish and nothing else will do, these top Maine eateries will go **off the menu** just for you.

BY OLIVIA GUNN KOSTISHEVSKAYA

FINDING A FIVE-STAR meal in Maine is not an issue. We're in the golden age of a culinary growth spurt, with top chefs serving up award-winning, original dishes celebrated around the country. Foodies, always ready for the latest trend, can hardly type their hashtags fast enough. But even with all the acclaim circulating, will chefs turn away a diner craving a tried-and-true favorite or regional delicacy?

"Any chef, especially at a fine dining establishment, will be interested and proud to have his or her guests taste a unique creation," says **Hugo Aguirre**, Director of Food and Beverage at **Grace White Barn Inn** in Kennebunk. "But without sounding pretentious, when you're a five-star, five-diamond restaurant, the name of the game is pleasing our guests and going above and beyond their expectations." Should someone request, say, Lobster Thermidor [See "The Curious Incident of the Lobster Thermidor," Summer-guide 2017] several days before a reservation for a special evening, White Barn Inn will make it, even

if it's off the menu, says Aguirre, but not before adding that a spectacular alternative is already offered by the Inn's Chef Matthew Padilla, "the Kennebunkport Lobster Fettuccine. It's very popular."

Some menu selections are eternal. Think martinis. If the classic martini isn't available on a trendy-tini menu at a great bar, don't imagine James Bond is going to be turned away.

Michelle Corry, co-owner of Portland's **555** and **Petite Jacqueline** with husband Steve Corry, says they've taken special requests at both restaurants since day one. "We need plenty of notice, and it's often restricted to product availability and how busy we are on any given day," she says. "But we've done lobster dinners, past menu items, specialty desserts,

Dare to disturb the status quo and order off menu? Petite Jacqueline will make *coq au vin*, while The White Barn Inn would be happy to satisfy your craving for Lobster Thermidor upon request.

cakes, strict dietary menus, and kosher menus for people, just to name a few."

At **Petite Jacqueline**, French cuisine classics are at the heart of the menu, but visitors might be surprised to see *Coq Au Vin*—chicken braised with red wine—missing from the list. Not to worry. Chef **Nick Dalaimo** says he's happy to serve this magic standard if given at least 24-hours notice. "We're happy to make good food for good people," he says. "It's no problem. While a chef's first instinct is to be most excited to cook something different," menu vagaries don't prevent a chef's exploring the fragrance of things past, especially since memories are most vividly evoked by the sense of smell. Think Marcel Proust and his madeines.

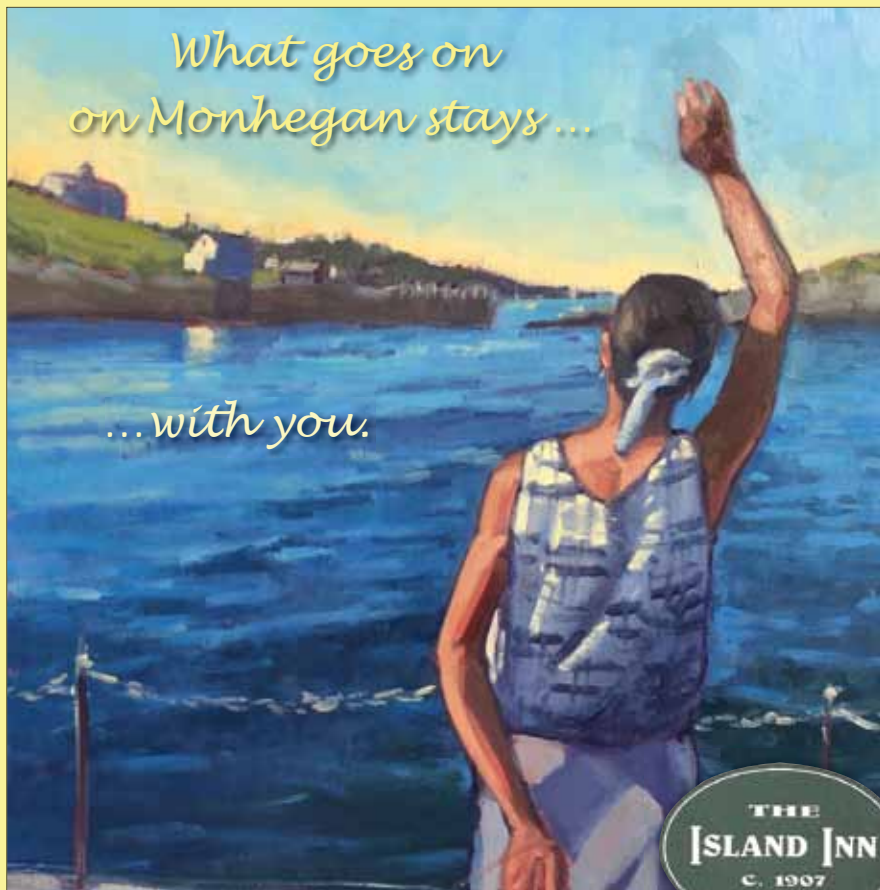
1) FIRST, BE POLITE.

It's hard to imagine any chef wanting to disappoint a hungry patron—chefs get hankerings too—but how do you make one of these dinner requests without being that guy? For start-



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HUNGRY EYE

ers, says Corry, try to give as much advance notice as possible. "If you're trying to convince a chef to serve a sentimental favorite, be ready to make your case—something that the chef either cooked before—that's always a compliment—or something uniquely special to you and your party or your special occasion."

2) BE READY TO TELL YOUR STORY.

For instance, Aguirre says, White Barn Inn was happy to oblige a couple that recently requested a replica wedding cake to celebrate the couple's ruby anniversary.

Cultivating special moments is all part of the service industry, but there are still some things that just won't fly. "Don't ask for a dish from another restaurant, and don't bring your own food," Corry says and laughs. "It's insulting to both the restaurant and the chef." She says it doesn't hurt to suggest that you'd come to the restaurant either way—ultimatums are so much like an ultimatum.

3) BE FLEXIBLE.

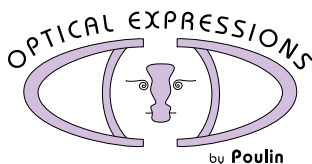
If the chef is sentimental enough to make your meal, you should expect to come in at an earlier or later time and possibly be asked to prepay. "If ingredients are brought in with extra time and labor, there needs to be a safety net if you don't show up," Corry says. You also need to keep in mind other restrictions. When asked if he could serve

the rare and potentially dangerous Japanese delicacy *Fugu* (blowfish), Masa Miyake of Miyake says, "You actually need to be licensed even to acquire it." The preparation is to be taken quite seriously as the fish contains tetrodotoxin, a poison much deadlier than cyanide. Still hungry? Miyake is more likely to depart from his menu to source the famous Japanese *Wagyu* beef for adventurous guests.

There's surely no one who understands a food craving more than a chef. Asking for a favorite dish or nostalgic dessert is certainly no crime and might even tickle an ego or two, if you follow the correct course of action. Maine chefs are creative, inventive, and, it appears, accommodating. ■



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