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Some Like It Cold

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

The city's chefs chill outside the half-shell.

If you go on a hunt for spectacular chilled seafood in Portland—whether prepared as crudo, sushi, ceviche, cooked-and-chilled, or otherwise, be prepared to be amazed. The raw bar is only the tip of the iceberg.

“The Ceviche Trio has been on the menu since our opening day,” says Shannon Bard, chef/owner of Zapoteca, the popular Old Port Mexican restaurant and tequileria. “Because they’re served in martini glasses, it’s not uncommon to walk around the dining room and see guests literally drinking the last drop.” Left to right: Vieira—citrus Maine scallops; Langosta—citrus lobster; and Veracruzano—fish, tomato, olives, and avocado.



INSTANT CLASSIC

It's nearly 2 p.m. on a drizzly Saturday afternoon, but lunch hour is still in full swing at Central Provisions on Fore Street. Every seat is taken, and many of these seats are already promised to other people waiting for them. The serenely lovely Paige Gould, who owns the restaurant with her chef-husband Chris, greets each arrival with a hospitable sincerity that tames chaos and impatience.

The place looks terrific, with brick walls, wide-plank wood floors, and a wood-topped bar set with cotton dishcloth napkins and Mason jelly jars for water. The narrow open kitchen runs behind the bar most of the

length of the room. Cooks work the line with crisp, economical movements, separated from diners by perfectly stacked white bowls, black slate trays, and wooden boards. A lot of black T-shirts, tattoos, and bandanas back here.

There's Albacore Tuna Crudo on the menu—Chris Gould is an established raw seafood ace—but we go instead for the Confit Tuna Crostini, which arrives on a slate rectangle. It's an oval slice of grilled bread topped with *crème fraîche* delicately spiked with bright orange flavor and large, silky flakes of impossibly tender tuna. Garnished with a few slivers of pick-

led red onion and cilantro leaves, there's utter harmony of flavor and texture. "A little sweet, a little crunchy, and really delicious," a server says.

"How was everything?" Paige asks when we leave.

It was just what you dream of when you order an open-faced tunafish sandwich from a James Beard Award Best New Restaurant nominee, a masterpiece of a nine-dollar lunch.

THEY SELL SEASHELLS

"OK, we just had the Brown Butter Lobster Roll," says a smiling young man sitting at Eventide's massive poured-concrete bar.



“The seafood sampler tray is really popular and it often includes Jonah crab claws,” says Stacia Tetrault, manager at Old Port Sea Grill. “Sometimes a group will share one with cocktails but I’ve seen two people come in and make a feast of it.”

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“My wife says it’s the best thing she’s ever eaten, *ever*. She thought this dessert she had in Paris two years ago was the best, but this lobster roll just beat it.” He holds up a picture he memorialized of it on his phone before they devoured it. “We came from Boston for the weekend. We’re going to have to have another one before we go home.”

Eventide, on Middle Street’s restaurant Gold Coast between Franklin and India streets, is, like Central Provisions, perpetually mobbed. People are lining up to get their names on the waiting list for a *bar stool*. (There are only a couple of actual tables.)

You’ll find the requisite accessories—black T-shirts, tattoos—and dishtowel nap-

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HUNGRY EYE



Albacore Tuna Crudo at Central Provisions awakens the senses with color, texture, and flavor.

kins at Eventide, too. There's a club-beat soundtrack just this side of too loud, and the servers are in constant motion delivering small plates from the kitchen out back.

Eventide's lobster rolls sell like hotcakes, and they're fantastic. Oysters are lined up in a crushed-ice sink set into the bar, their origins labeled on vertical popsicle-stick markers. The menu has versions of tuna and golden snapper crudo, and a halibut tartare. The chalkboard has a raw skate wing special.

We go for the Char Tartare. "I've had it; it's so good," our bartender says. She's right, this special is a winner. Gleaming half-inch cubes of translucent fish are garnished with a few shreds of pickled red onion and a couple of exotic, skinny white mushrooms. There's a thin squirt of a pale green tamarind-tinged aioli separating the tartare from what at first appear to be crumbled, frazzled shallot shreds but turn out to be bacon crumbs. Who thinks this stuff up? Once again, see under James Beard Award nominees. Eventide's Mike Wiley and An-



FROM TOP: JOAQUIN MALLMANN; COREY TEMPLETON

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HUNGRY EYE

drew Taylor are short-listed for Best Chef Northeast this year.

ORIGINAL MASTERS

If you love raw and unusual cold seafood, you're also conversant with sushi restaurants.

Step into Benkay's congenial palace on the corner of Commercial and India streets and leave behind the insistent beat of the Old Port. Here is order and symmetry, red-cushioned bar stools, chairs, tables, and ta-

bleware neatly aligned. Every seat has a view out into the harbor.

Ankimo—monkfish liver—is one of those delicacies, like uni and eel, that gives sushi places their exotic edge. The liver is cooked in a cylinder and then chilled and sliced. At Benkay, three pink slices stand upright in each of two nori-circled rice segments. Ankimo is the foie gras of the sea: firm but tender, silken in texture, subtly briney, and not at all fishy.

There's pickled ginger alongside, but no wasabi. Instead, tiny cubes of what looks like beef consommé are placed artfully over the ankimo.

"Ponzu jelly," the server murmurs.

GALLIC CHARM

"Part of the bistro experience is pageantry," says Michelle Corry, who owns Petite Jacqueline on State Street with her chef husband Steve. Petite's Eiffel Tower of Seafood is a big seller in the summer. The tower is filled with oysters and littlenecks on the half-shell, and cold cocktail shrimp. Steamed and chilled lobster tails are dressed with mayo, shallots, and fine herbs.

"Unique vessels and service points are traditionally French. For example, snails in their shells and the iconic French onion soup bowls. It's fun and festive, and a big part of the bistro experience is the social aspect, sharing dishes such as fondue and raclette."

She's right. Bright, fresh shellfish arrayed on crushed ice in a tower of trays can make even a rainy day just a little bit wonderful. ■



The sushi masters at Benkay on India Street create seafood sculpture.



Eventide's crudo is always prettily presented and precisely garnished.



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