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A 220-pound bluefin tuna is processed at Upstream Trucking next to Scales Restaurant.

Getting Fresh

There's a difference between fresh fish and "fresh fish." Especially for the resourceful locals who know **the secrets of where and when** to go!

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

PROOF—IF YOU EVEN NEED IT—that Portland is a seafood paradise requires just a stroll around town. The high count of seafood markets, seafood shacks, sushi restaurants, and uber seafood restaurants is something truly impressive. We are one lucky city. But are we fresh? One measure is, the faster the turnover, the fresher the fish.

TO MARKET

Snoop into the fish markets to check out summer best sellers.

Cullen Burke manages **Free Range Fish and Seafood** on Commercial Street, at the far western edge of the Old Port. "In the summer, we're selling 400 to 500 pounds of haddock a day. Salmon, tuna, and sword are the big summer grillers—everyone wants to grill fish at this time of year."

HUNGRY EYE

There's plenty of shellfish here, too—oysters, littlenecks, and mussels are heaped on crushed ice. With oysters on so many menus around town, do people really buy them and take them home to shuck them themselves? “Oh, sure,” Burke says. And if they don't know how, “We give them a little tutorial” and sell them a shucking knife and protective glove if they need them.

Harbor Fish Market seems to have the oyster market cornered, with a zillion varieties identified with hand-written signs dug into a vast case of crushed ice.



At **Browne Trading Company's** seafood counter, Alex Murphy says, “Atlantic salmon is our biggest seller, and tuna. We've got great crabmeat from the mid-coast. But you'd be surprised how much

From The Sea to Your Plate

“Very few local things in fish markets come off the boats anymore, other than occasionally tuna,” says Jasmine Miller at Browne Trading's retail seafood counter. “It's all auction.” The auction means the Fish Exchange on the sprawling waterfront Portland Fish Pier.

“It ensures that the fishermen don't get undercut. The fishermen bring their catch to the auction house, and there are auctions on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, plus a huge one on Sunday. And people think you can't get fish on Monday! It's a real auction—how much will you bid for 50 pounds of haddock? All the fish markets here go to these auctions.”

Miller offers an analogy. “It's a tiered system, similar to wine and beer distribution.” In addition to the busy retail business at Browne, “We're a distributor of local seafood we get at the auction, plus we import from small-scale, sustainable farmed operations all over the world, like salmon from Scotland and the Faroe Islands, and a land-based salmon farm in Sarasota called Sapphire. It's better for the environment. We get salmon from True North in Eastport, too, and there's a land-based Maine salmon farm in the planning stage. If we want to keep eating fish, we've got to figure out ways to raise it.”

She adds, “If a Portland restaurant serves caviar—say, Central Provisions, Tipó, or Lio—they probably get it from us.”

local skate, monkfish, cod, and halibut the restaurants buy.”

Maybe it's not that surprising considering Portland chefs' commitment to the local and the sustainable, to say nothing of our own endless quests to discover what they do with them.

“We smoke a lot of salmon and trout here. We've got two smokers—hot and cold, and we cure salmon, too, with no smoke.” Everyone's into uni pasta sauces,” Murphy says. “The Maine urchin season is

when the water's colder, though, so at this time of year we're mostly getting it from Japan.” And although it was a very hot menu item in years past, “We don't have much going on with octopus at the moment.”

SECRET SOURCE

Upstream Trucking is tucked in a warehouse down the wharf from Scales restaurant. It has no sign and there is no shop, but they move a lot of seafood. Upstream began 16 years ago as a partnership between George Parr and Dana Street and his partners in Street & Company, Fore Street—and, more recently, Scales—restaurants as a means to supply these places with seafood.

“That's how it *started*, anyway,” says Parr, “but I keep picking up new accounts. They find me. I'm supplying Eventide with 10,000 pounds of oysters a week. Emelitsa comes down, Petite Jacqueline, Izakaya Minato, Mr. Tuna. Paolo [Laboa] walks down from Solo [Italiano]. And 555 and 188, and Cara Stadler's [Bao Bao and Lio in Portland, and Tao Yuan in Brunswick] are here almost every day; she's great. Anybody who owns three restaurants in town comes here. Some of these accounts are fairly small, but they're very particular about their seafood. I'm honored to supply these young artists. It's what really makes the whole food scene.

“I only get a few things directly off the boat. In winter, a scalloper can tie up right here,” says Parr, stepping out the west side of his warehouse and indicating a perfect spot to dock with a view of the harbor and the patios of the Porthole and Boone's. “Don't I have the best office in town?”

“Guys like **Bangs Island Mussels** who

"Some of my accounts are fairly small, but they're very particular about their seafood." —George Parr, Upstream Trucking



That 220-pound tuna from Upstream Trucking becomes a beautiful tuna crudo appetizer at Scales restaurant next door.

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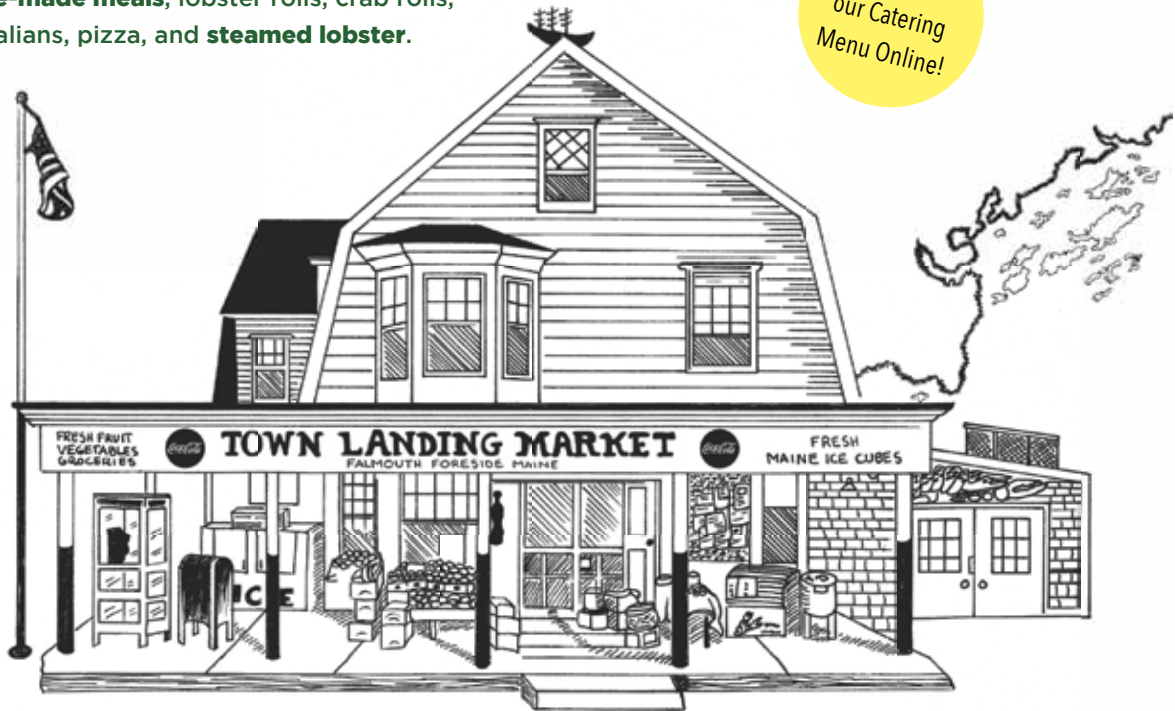


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HUNGRY EYE

deliver direct come by truck, not boat. And the mackerel, squid, and bluefish I get from the Richmond Island fish weir come by truck, too. I go to the auction here, and I go to Boston twice a week.”

Unlike Browne Trading, Harbor Fish Market, and Free Range, Upstream has no retail market. “Yet,” says Parr, leading the way to a bright room where a market is planned.

TIME TO EAT

About that octopus... *It's best if you have more than one line of position to make a fix.*

We enter **Scales**, a shining, shipshape place of golden evening summer sunlight. A bustling wait-staff transports drinks and platters. The first thing to catch our eye is a huge octopus in a bin of crushed ice, its tentacles dramatically arranged.

At Scales, octopus is going on. “I think it's our most popular hot appetizer,” one of the cooks says as he plates plump pieces of grilled tentacle and chorizo glistening with sauce. Octopus is that popular?

Aburi Shime Saba at Izakaya Minato showcases fresh Maine mackerel.



Chef Fred Eliot walks by, so we ask him. “Yes, it is,” he says with a smile, and confirms the provenance of the beast on the ice: “Portugal.”

Don't miss the salt cod croquettes, here, either. They're crisp, crumb-coated, and fried, served on a spicy pool of roasted red pepper aioli, a perfect cocktail bite.

ON THE STREET

It never hurts to be flexible. Across Commercial Street, we're checking the Smoked Salmon BLT with lemon/dill mayo on the menu posted outside the **Old Port Sea Grill** when we spy a food cart in a prime spot in front of the Custom House.

It's **Mr. Tuna**, the mobile sushi cart manned by chef Graham Botto. He deftly assembles bits of spicy raw tuna, umeboshi pickled plum paste, seasoned sushi rice, and matchsticks of cucumber, all of which he rolls into a slim cone of dried nori sea-



FROM TOP: ELAINE ALDEN; COURTESY MR. TUNA

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LONGITUDE -69° 59' 32"

weed and dusts with crunchy tempura flakes. It's a \$6 masterpiece.

"I was a sous-chef at Back Bay Grill," he says. "But I'm happier doing this than being in any kitchen."

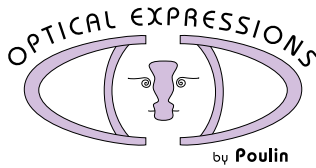
A few days later, we find Mr. Tuna's cart in the patio seating area outside **Sagamore Hill**, the new cocktail bar in the Lafayette building at the corner of Congress and Park streets. Botto is joined by Mr. Tuna owner, Jordan Rubin, who makes us a roll of spicy salmon with avocado, scallions, and sweet chili sauce that's got sweet/salty/spicy in irresistible balance.

There are in fact three Mr. Tunas manning the carts around town—Rubin, Botto, and Kyle Reynolds. The enterprise will soon have a space in the Public Market House on the first floor.

"I went to Johnson & Wales," Rubin says. "I learned sushi at Uni in Boston [one of chef Ken Oringer's spots in the Eliot Hotel]. That's where I met Chris Gould [who owns Central Provisions with his wife, Paige]. Kyle and Graham and I met at Central Provisions—we all cooked there."



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HUNGRY EYE

Of the clever sushi cones that eliminate the need for chopsticks, he says, "In bigger cities like Boston and New York, these hand-rolls are everywhere."

Mr. Tuna's edge comes from Rubin's custom recipes—bright combinations of sauces and garnishes—that showcase each type of seafood. You'll never miss the wasabi, pickled ginger, and soy-dipping.

EXOTIC LITTLE BITES

Really, it's who you know. There's a delicious fillet served as an appetizer at **Izakaya Minato** on Washington Avenue.

"We have Aburi Shime Saba whenever our guy in Cape Elizabeth can bring us mackerel," says Elaine Alden, who owns Minato with her husband, chef Thomas Takashi Cooke. "Saba is Japanese for mackerel, shime means we vinegar-cure it, and Aburi means it's torched," to crisp the skin.

"Thomas does something similar with Portuguese sardines when we can get them from Browne Trading," Alden says. "But he also double-fries the bones and serves them on the side for crunch."

SUMMER SPECIALS

It never hurts to compare experiences and increase your bandwidth. **Bolster, Snow & Co.**'s summer menu has a lobster crostini on the appetizer roster, along with an even more jazzy app of "just-poached lobster," says Anthony DeLois, who co-owns the restaurant and the Francis hotel that houses it with his two brothers. "The meat's minced and formed into an egg-shaped quenelle. This sits on a pool of sauce made of Aji Amarillo pepper with mango and yuzu," and it's topped with a lacy house-made cracker.

The hotel bar here is a great cocktail-hour destination, and from 4 to 7 p.m., oysters and shrimp are \$1 each. Bartender Andrew Thompson suggests a glass of dry white Austrian wine on special. The other bar patrons are hotel guests, and it's always fun to hear what visitors are doing here. A young man and woman to my right from Long Island have a goblet of local craft beer and a dozen Mookie Blue oysters from Damariscotta in front of each of them.

"This trip is an oyster mission," she says, and she sounds serious. "We've been to Eventide, Hot Suppa, and the Oyster Shop for oysters, and we're not done."

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HUNGRY EYE

DRIFT WITH THE SEASONS

What's the secret of fresh seafood? Timing. "I moved here almost three years ago and learned very quickly the ephemerality of the growing season and bounty of warmer weather seafood," says chef Ben Jackson at **Drifters Wife**. "I like to pair things happening at the same time, land or sea. And I like the odd bits...say, marinated bluefish with cucumbers and mint, or smoked mackerel with potatoes and ramp remoulade. We smoke the fish in-house and cure the smaller fish for use in vinaigrettes and whatnot. We save other fish scraps, belly and trim, to poach in olive oil and make mayo." Jackson is a chef who can make you love turnips, so trust him with that fish mayo.

Recently, Drifter's Wife has offered "steamer clams with garlic scapes and rye bread; halibut with nettle broth and periwinkles; and frisee lettuce with smoked alewife vinaigrette and soft egg. Everything deserves a chance to shine." ■



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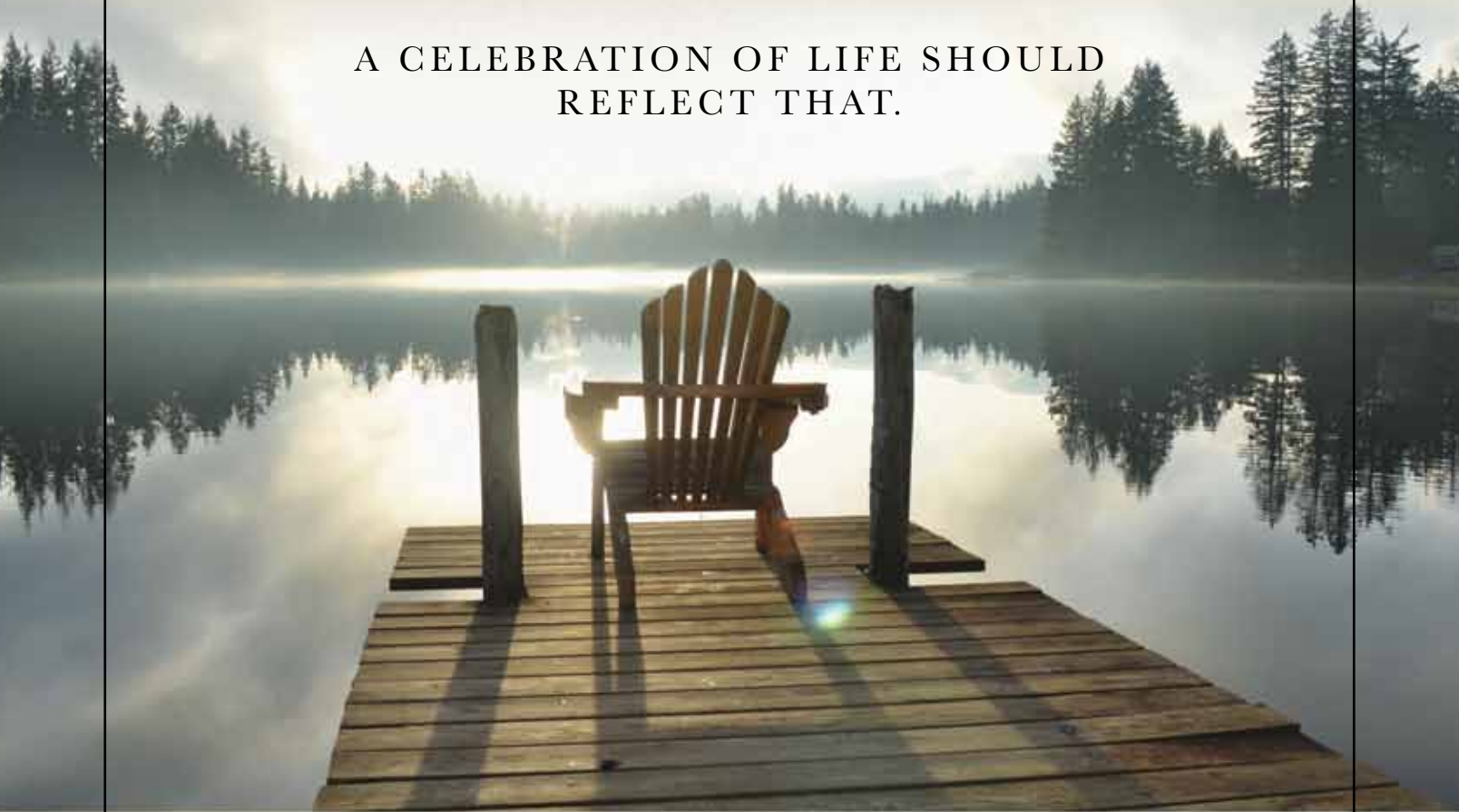
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