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Because Portland is a port, it is a tidal city. And what are tides, if not currents that ebb and flow? Over the years we've watched as Congress Street has gone boom and bust and back again. Art venues seem to blossom in herds before they become unheard. But new venues take seed and over time, despite the roughness of the rhythms, it is clear that Maine's first city is a truly fertile ground. Because of this, we sometimes see emptied spaces not as shuttered failures but as fallow fields.

And that is why, when I see the empty

BY DANIEL KANY

An exultant crowd exits One Longfellow Square after a comedy show.
Bold seafood and pasta dishes descended from those eaten by the famed pirates and explorers of Genoa, Italy, birthplace of pesto. Solo Italiano’s Genovese menu boasts freshly made pasta, locally sourced seafood, and Best in the World pesto.

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movement, the Maine art scene, and favorite local fixed points like Beal’s (ice cream), DuckFat (fries), and Nosh (burgers). Take a Longfellow staple. Pai Men Miyake doesn’t pretend to make authentic Japanese-style ramen, which is artfully subtle and infinitely light. Instead, try their paitan ramen, unapologetically rich and indulgent. If you want a level field comparison, try their Brussels sprouts—every normal kid’s anathema, right? Deep-fried to a crispy perfection and then dressed with a flavor explosion led by fish sauce and mint, these Brussels sprouts transcend expectation.

The square is anchored by Franklin Simmons’ heroically scaled Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Monument, unveiled in 1888. While seated in an ornate indoor armchair with lion-carved armrests, Maine’s most famous poet is depicted wearing an overcoat, a quirk that seems to invite Longfellow’s annual holiday adornments of scarves, wrapped presents, and so on.

The square’s literary flavor is quietly held intact by LFK, a bar that occupies the old Cunningham Books shop. Within, books and old typewriters abound among the dark wood spaces. True to local spirit, the craft beer choices are impressively deep, and the food surpasses expectations, whether standards like mac and cheese and burgers or hearty and creative vegetarian fare.

Across Congress Street, the vast hole where Joe’s Smoke Shop used to be is rising toward its new life as an eight-story apartment building. This will only increase the happening bustle in and around the square. The 70-year-old Joe’s, moreover, is being resurrected in the new building as Joe’s Super Variety.

Further along Congress Street, the Longfellow Square influence seems to be taking hold. David Levi, chef and owner of the celebrated eco eatery Vinland, has staked his claim to the space in 3 Deering Avenue in Bramhall Square, ready to transform this neglected corner of the West End into a mecca for foodies. Good news for workers in Peloton Labs and Maine Medical, who until now have had to traipse up Congress to indulge in gourmet delights.

A departure from the stringently local-only, gluten-free approach adopted by Vinland, Ros-sobianco (meaning “Red White” in Italian) serves up traditional Northern Italian cuisine, inspired by Levi’s father’s heritage and prepared by hot shot head chef Scott London. This means olive oil, citrus, and carb-forward favorites such as pasta and risotto are back on the menu.

“There’s a misconception that I only believe in eating local food. Vinland is my baby, it’s unique, but it’s liberating to do something different!”

Try a selection of “cicchetti,” Italian-style small plates from regions such as Lombardy and Veneto, paired with a glass from the extensive natural wine selection.

as OLS sits on the Arts District corner of Longfellow Square, its community-oriented artiness knits it to Portland’s deep vein of casually dressed and yet mindfully creative culture.

Is Longfellow Square in danger of becoming overrun with trendy pretend- ers? I wouldn’t bet on it. I don’t think the Treasure Chest, that wizened shop of naughtiness, or the dive-y and unpren- tentious Blackstones are going anywhere any- time soon. I rather think the neighbor- hood is more like Longfellow himself, the old Bowdoin professor who not only gave us popular poems like the “Song of Hiawatha” and “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere,” but who was also the first American to trans- late Dante’s Divine Comedy. The neighbor- hood itself seems to be reflecting the spirit of Longfellow’s savvy advice: “Build today, then strong and sure, With a firm and ample base; And ascending and secure. Shall tomorrow find its place.”
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