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Dinner /s The Show

The newest old trend is putting the circus back in 'bread and circus.'

BY COLIN W. SARGENT

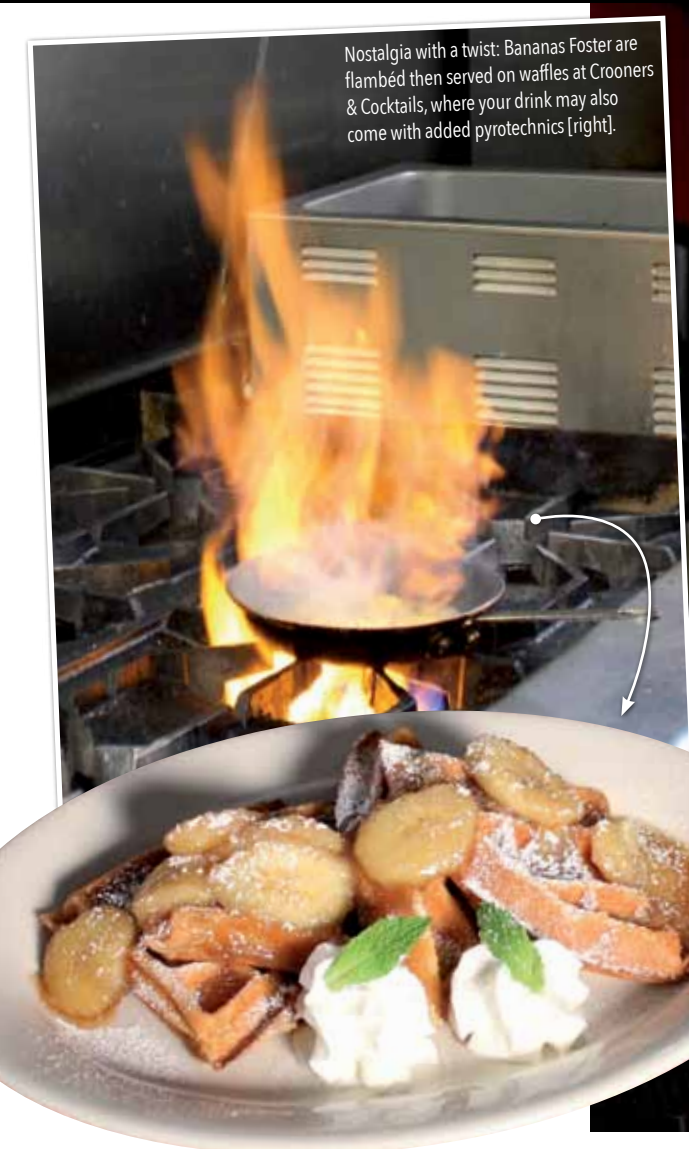
A GROUP OF FRIENDS was talking about food trends when the discussion turned to food as theater. You know those mid-century showy presentations: open kitchens, tableside prep with guéridons and portable gas jets, salads tossed with 'ginormous' utensils, juggled cocktail shakers, and, most flamboyantly, **flambé**.

HEAD CHEF DEREK BISSONNETTE; COURTESY THE WHITE BARN INN

Those in the know request a showstopping Baked Alaska for special occasions at The White Barn Inn; [right] The restaurant's inviting, rustic dining room.



Nostalgia with a twist: Bananas Foster are flambéd then served on waffles at Crooners & Cocktails, where your drink may also come with added pyrotechnics [right].



“Wait, what? Nobody’s doing that around here anymore.”

She was right in the sense that flambé was snuffed out decades ago. But didn’t flambe’s box-office bombing set the stage for its comeback?

Now that the Recession is receding and comfort food has become a little too comforting (read tame), people are looking for an excuse to dress up that isn’t just your second-best-friend’s mother’s college roommate’s niece’s wedding.

With the closure of Barnum and Bailey, bringing the show back to the dining room may be just the ticket. Turns out, restaurateurs are beginning to step up to the plate.

“Spotted—the Baked Alaska making a comeback in Toronto restaurants.” Or check out newsposto.com: “Baked Alaska [is] a retro dessert that’s making a comeback.” It’s the surprise of the summer. Sud-

denly, everybody knew Baked Alaska before it was hot. “It is said to have been inspired by America’s purchase of Alaska in 1867,” [newsposto](http://newsposto.com) opines. “Now nostalgia for this thermodynamically challenging pudding is making it popular again.”

I remember as a young Naval Officer, you weren’t allowed to go out from a dining in until the Baked Alaska had sung.

And so it goes now in Maine.

KEEPER OF THE FLAME

“We serve Baked Alaska,” says **Hugo Aguirre**, who’s been at the **White Barn Inn Relais and Bistro** since July. “Especially on holidays. A lot of people come here for the classic dining experience. When they come, they do like to enjoy the presentation. They want to linger. They like to be entertained.”

It’s a special occasion here every night,

with flambé part of the pyrotechnics.

“We also have two versions of the Bananas Foster,” both well lit. “One is for the White Barn Bistro, our less formal restaurant. It’s the classic Bananas Foster presentation. We take butter and sugar and sauté it and burn banana liqueur and rum and flambé it. This is all tableside. It’s a conversation starter. It’s very popular. People love to take pictures, love to take video. Every-

“Now that comfort food has become a little too comforting (read tame), people are looking for an excuse to dress up and be attended to.”



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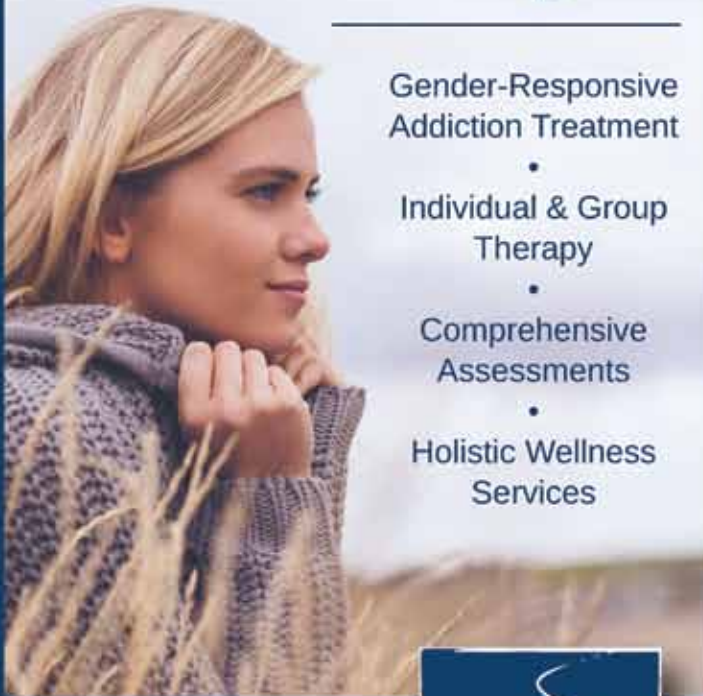
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PORTLAND AFTER DARK



one is aware of it in the bistro.”

But there's a lot to be said for a private flame. In the fine dining part of the White Barn Inn, “We have a banana soufflé wrapped inside a crêpe.” Here, it's less showy but no less romantic. It's another tableside experience, “presented with two bananas that have been brûléed. Finally, Myers Rum is lit and poured (while still flaming) onto the plate.”

Beyond the fire, what's the trick to flambé? “People will never stop loving flambé if you do it right. It's done right, I would say, if you keep it classic—not necessarily classy but classic.”

Aguirre agrees flambé went dark over the last decade, but he considers the disappearance the exception, not the rule. “A lot of things ‘went away’ after the crisis in 2008.” Once the shadow of the stock-market plunge started directing the market, “Efficiency in cost was the biggest driver in our industry.” Not the greatest news for romantic diners. “Fine dining with tableside presentation took such a massive hit that it almost disappeared for a while. It's something I love to do, just as I love salt-crust-ed whole fish served at tableside, where you debone for the guests.”

Do your classic presentations include the famous 1980s show-stopper, Chateaubriand for two with baby vegetables?

“We do that too, actually,” Aguirre says. “We have Chateaubriand on our bistro menu. We carve it for tableside, cooked to perfection—asparagus, mushrooms, a red wine jus. During the Recession, people were disinclined to order it because it seemed too extravagant. But many diners are rediscovering it as a wonderful way to celebrate.

FROM TOP: CHEF DEREK BISSONNETTE - WHITE BARN INN; LEAH FISHER ARSENAULT PHOTOGRAPHY

“With Chateaubriand, where you use the best filet of tenderloin, it’s an expensive item that you don’t get so much profit from. But what you do deliver is value.”

Really, what’s a memory worth?

Fore Street offers a peppermint Baked Alaska from its bag of tricks. It’s most likely to appear in the summer, virtually without warning, a surprise. For a place already famous for its open-grill fire, it’s no big deal. “We just brûlée the marshmallow.”

Could I also order the rum baba flaming? The busy staffer hangs up before I could hear the answer.

The Harraseeket Inn in Freeport had Bananas Foster on the menu last spring. According to the restaurant staffer we spoke to, we’ll have to wait for summer to see if there’s a second act.

TORCH SONG

It’s not just food that’s being re-ignited, my fellow raconteurs. Flaming cocktails are lighting up the **Hunt + Alpine Club**. And at **Crooners & Cocktails** on 90 Exchange Street, “we have the Dean Martin Flame of Love,” says **Rachael Joyce**, general manager and bartender. “It’s a Stoli martini: three ounces of Stoli chilled with a ’chino cherry rinse and finished with a flamed orange peel. A simple, clean cocktail. We do the flaming right here at the bar. If a customer asks, we’ll do it tableside!”

But there’s got to be a morning after. Following your long night’s journey into day, there returns everyone’s excuse for drinking at noon, brunch. Established 120 years ago, brunch is on fire, too. [Some



Madison Gouzie, cover model and owner of The Marshmallow Cart, uses a torch to prepare his signature roasted s’mores.

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Watercolor by Richard Anzelc

people say the whole juice-based cocktail thing, viz., thick Bloody Marys, mimosas, and cosmopolitans, originated with brunch. See the *Washington Post's* story "How brunch became the most delicious—and divisive—meal in America."]

Crooners & Cocktails combines the two trends of returning brunch and returning flambé every Sunday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. "On our brunch menu we have Bananas Foster Waffles," Joyce says. Watch the blue flame flap above the melted butter, brown sugar, rum, cinnamon, and ice-cream with the jazzy history of New Orleans. Yes, please. Ring-a-ding-ding.

ORIGINAL SIN

So after decades in the dark, our appetite for tableside theater and all things flambé is being re-ignited. Recognition of this appeared in *Bon Appétit Magazine* as early as 2014, when senior editor Julia Kramer dug out a 1978 story "Let's Flambé a Lobster!" from her archives and whimsically posted it. The internet was lit on fire.

J's Oyster

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Underground tiki bar **Rhum** favors a flaming Sterno-dipped lime to garnish dinner and drinks. Anything else? "We'll set anything you want on fire!" says Chef Chad Austin.

We were sitting at Table 11 in the **Grill Room**, where the experience to the open flame is perfectly framed, watching the chef deftly turn meat in the dramatic flames, and wondered, "Can Cherries Jubilee, Crêpes Suzette, Harbor Lights, and Steak Diane be on the horizon?"

Restaurateurs are recognizing and seizing on our need to dawdle over our meals. We will no longer be satisfied standing in front of a food truck and eating only with our hands. We want to see our food be prepared, and we want to wait for it. And that's what's what. ■

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