



THE ROOMS RESTAURANTS

RESTAURANTS BY HARDING LEE SMITH // OWNER + CHEF



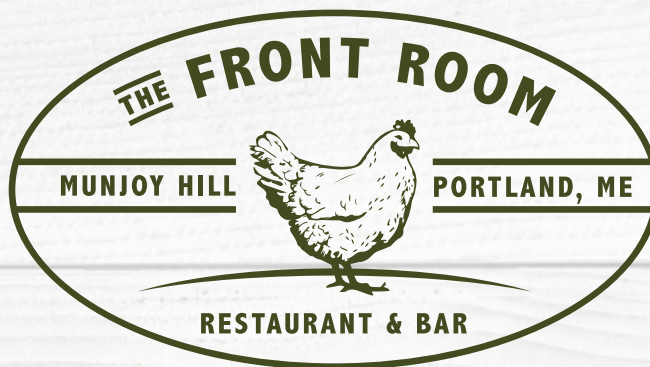
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FIND THE ROOMS RESTAURANTS ON:    

Back On The Menu

What's old is **new** again.
The fundamental things apply.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

“REMEMBER WHEN RESTAURANTS were special?” asks Andrew Knowlton, editor of *Bon Appetit*, in the April issue. We sure do. Knowlton, a notorious trend-hound, now pines for the days when the maître d’ would pull out his chair in the sort of restaurant where patrons wore “something other than jeans.”

But maybe it’s not about the white tablecloths—maybe it’s about the vibe, the ambience, and best of all, the food. In Portland, it’s easy to find restaurants that are special in that way you remember, but also new and exciting.

FONDUE & OYSTERS

“Courtney’s food is full of intuition,” says **Birch Shambaugh**, co-owner with his wife **Fayth Preyer**, of **Woodford Food & Beverage** at Portland’s ever-bustling Woodford’s Corner.

At lively F&B, site of the original mid-20th-century Valle’s Steak House, chef **Courtney Loreg** takes us back by refashioning dishes we remember into something better. Croque Monsieur (and Madame), the Sunday night plat du jour, is “comfort epito-



MALCOLM BEDELL - FROMAWAY.COM

Even Jillian and Malcolm Bedell, bloggers and owners of Rockland-based **Wich, Please** sandwich truck, can't resist the allure of "old-school recipes." Marvel at the Maine lobster-stuffed Chateaubriand recipe on their blog (fromaway.com). We doubt they'll be making this dish in the back of a food truck anytime soon...

HUNGRY EYE

mized,” says Shambaugh. “It’s the best take on a ham and cheese sandwich you’ve ever had.” It’s hard to argue, considering the excellent smoked ham, impeccable Swiss cheese, rustic bread, and flawless béchamel.

Then there’s the ambience—deep, plushy booths, a long bar, plate-glass windows overlooking the great white way of Forest Avenue traffic—and the background music. “We believe in vinyl,” says Shambaugh. Spinning old albums on a turntable “is the right soundtrack for what we do here.”

Here is where you rediscover the forgotten pleasures of Oysters Rockefeller, a grilled steak and fries, and Scallops Gratin. “We do the old things we like,” says Loreg. “The gratinee is basically scallop casserole.” Don’t pigeonhole these dishes as straight-up retro, though. The cheese fondue is made with Great Hill Blue. The Kale, Frisee, and Radicchio with Poached Egg appetizer is “a hybrid of classic Caesar and Lyonnaise salads.” The dressing is bright and lemony, spiked with pecorino, and the croutons and pork lardons have been swapped out for crisp, golden coins of fried fingerling potato.

‘Same Stock,’ Different Name

“Ever heard of bone broth? At least as a term, bone broth is relatively new, popularized—even hipsterized—by the rise of the paleo diet, which focuses on the consumption of meat, fish, vegetables and fruit, or the kinds of foods that may have formed our diet during the Paleolithic era. The broth, usually homemade but increasingly available at shops and through special order, boasts a thick texture with a pronounced flavor, and it’s the latest darling of the health food world, with cookbooks, websites, and even a Southern California restaurant devoted to the stuff.”—*The Virginian Pilot*

Here in Portland, **LB Kitchen** took a chance on the trend. You can buy a warming 12oz. cup of ‘Liquid Gold’ to sip while you eat at the petite bistro on the East End. “It took

some convincing before [chef and owner Lee Farrington] agreed to serve it,” says life and business partner Bryna Gootkind with a complicit smile. Made from chicken bone broth, turmeric, and coconut chili oil, the ‘drink’ has a salty kick that Gootkind says is “packed with good fats.”



[Clockwise from top left] With its funky mid-century architecture and preference for vinyl it’s no surprise Woodford Food & Beverage is championing the return of retro menu items; keep an eye out for deviled eggs on bar menus across town, including LFK and Hot Suppa; classic Steak au Poivre makes a welcome return to Portland courtesy of Timber Steakhouse; and the ultra-hip bone marrow trend shows no sign of waning in Portland.



ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

We go in search of more reimaged classics, and we find some at **Scales** on Commercial Street. The big, airy seafood restaurant has windows for days overlooking the commercial waterfront and ferry traffic. Co-owner **Dana Street** admitted from the outset that he was giving a nod to the old Durgin Park in Boston, but we sense even more of bygone Anthony’s Pier 4 elegance.

Since this is a Street-and-partners establishment—as are Fore Street and Street & Company—there’s the signature poured-concrete bar, complete with narrow trench for crushed ice to accommodate your raw-bar selections. There’s mellow, repurposed wood, flattering lighting, and lazily rotating ceiling fans. Like the other two spots, Scales looks terrific and the service is professional.

There’s Boston brown bread with baked beans and bacon, if you must, and wonderful old staples such as grilled skirt steak, short-rib pot roast, and pan-roasted duck breast. More thrilling, on a recent visit the evening’s specials are Monkfish Au Poivre, and Skate Schnitzel with an egg on top served with spätzle. How’s that for shaking up the classics?



A couple of old salts next to us at the bar pick their way through a pile of Jonah crab claws heaped on ice in front of them. On our other side, a young woman and her date are sharing an appetizer of smoked bluefish on julienned, roasted beets over a swirl of lemony yogurt, all of it crowned with a tangle of brilliant green dill. (Beets are still very much in style.) Our bartender, Morgan, actually asks us if we’d “like that martini shaken or stirred.” We urge her to use her judgment.

We give a start when we discover there are no Parker House rolls on the menu. When Scales opened last year, it received much fanfare for its distinctive version. “They change the menu constantly,” says Morgan. “The Parker House rolls will probably be back at some point, but right now they’ve switched it up to cloverleaf rolls with chive butter.”

Later, we track down Parker House rolls baked fresh daily at **Grant’s Bak-**

“Parker House rolls

are as much of a tradition in the United States as any bread. They were created, so the story goes, by the Parker House in Boston, which was one of our great nineteenth-century hostels. Parker House rolls should be delicate, soft, and rather sweet, typical of American rolls in the nineteenth century, and they consume butter by the tons.” —James Beard



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HUNGRY EYE

ery in Lewiston. “We always have them because people always want them,” says **Pam Grant**. “They’re made with the same yeast dough as the plain dinner rolls, but people go nuts because they split them and slip in some butter, and glaze them with an egg wash to be shiny. And we eat with our eyes, right?”

FANCY BYGONE BITS

Remember when bone marrow was all the rage? Well, it’s back. Find the roasted bones with local mushrooms and sourdough toast at **Lolita**. At **Central Provisions**, the marrow is liberated from the bones and presented on toast with fontina, horseradish cream, and onion jam.

Then there’s the raw revival. Sounds queasy, but squeamish is out and raw beef is back in. We found shaved beef carpaccio with truffled asparagus salad at **Crooners & Cocktails**, and classic steak tartare with a raw egg yolk on grilled rustic toast at **Woodford Food & Beverage**. There’s beef carpaccio with arugula and smoked-onion aioli at **Tipo**, the new fancy-peasant Italian

restaurant on Ocean Avenue.

Fancied-up peasant food is Portland’s own perpetual trend. Beets, Brussels sprouts, and kale are menu royalty here. And look at smelts! They’ve filled the niche left empty when sweet little Maine shrimp became an endangered species. We discovered clever preparations on spring menus all over town, including fried at Lolita and served with a paprika aioli; with fiery pepper aioli at Tipo; and with fancy slaw and ginger mayo at **Fore Street**. Keeping it Nordic, **Portland Hunt + Alpine Club** serves pickled smelts.

On the other end of the spectrum, once considered the epitome of passé party food, **deviled eggs** are suddenly on every bar menu in town. With a twist of modernity, **Hot Suppa** offers a Sriracha-infused, bacon-topped version; **Terlingua** dishes them up covered in smoked salmon and olives; while at **Rhum**, you can enjoy an unlimited number sprinkled with toasted coconut flakes during happy hour. Never say never.

BEEF & BOURBON

OK, let’s get back to old-time glamour. At this time of year, you might think of Exchange Street as the place where out-of-towners come to shop and eat Holy Donuts *en plein air*, but it’s also the Gold Coast for cocktails and steak. **The Grill Room** came first to upper Exchange, where you can watch the cooks at the open fire searing your New York sirloin and dressing your wedge salad with blue cheese and bacon. Steps away, at **Crooners & Cocktails**, you can nibble stuffed mushrooms before your tournedos and garlic-whipped potatoes. The dark, clubby interior calls out for bourbon.

“Bourbon and rye are very big,” says bartender **Rachael Joyce**, who keeps an impressive collection of artisanal bitters on hand for the Old Fashioneds and other hearty cocktails. “The bourbon and rye from **Stroudwater Distillery** on Thompson’s Point are excellent.”

At **Timber Steak House**, a few doors up, memory lane is paved with Steak au Poivre and bourbon peppercorn sauce, and Surf



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& Turf with an eight-ounce filet steak and poached lobster tail. Call ahead and make a reservation and request a Chateaubriand for two to be cut to order for you. "Chef serves it with a red wine sauce," says manager **Jenny Lord**, "but we always have béarnaise if you prefer."

SPRINGTIME IN PARIS

If you really want to go full-stop nostalgic, take a field trip to **Maurice**, the charming 40-year-old classic French restaurant in South Paris. Visit over Memorial Day weekend and you can catch the famous **Lilac Festival** and 20th-anniversary celebration at the McLaughlin Garden there.

At Maurice, Gallic charm has never gone out of style. With candlelight flickering on your cloth-draped table, you can indulge in Escargots à la Bourguignonne and Coquilles St. Jacques with mushrooms and mornay sauce.

"Give us a day's notice," says owner **Corey Sumner**, "and sure, of course we'll have your Chateaubriand and béarnaise sauce. We'll slice it tableside." ■



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