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# NOT Home for the Holidays

Push yourself away from the table, baby, and hit the town.

BY OLIVIA GUNN

It's that time of year again, folks. The leaves are ditching us, snow has fallen, and the city's even started the search for the perfect tree to shine brightly in Monument Square. All of this adds up to cozy nights by the fire, festive parties with friends and neighbors, and holiday cheer. It also means you'll be expecting visits from everyone and their mother, including, possibly, yours.

So where do you take your family in a town with a choice for everyone? If yours is anything like my family, deciding where to eat or drink can mean rolling out a lot of baggage. The holidays are stressful enough without the never-ending family feud between Aunt Sis and Grandma Dot. So here are some suggestions for you and yours that may get you through. Happy Holidays!

## UP FRONT

While you can always expect a bit of a wait, the Front Room is an easy choice for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Most likely, you'll find something on the menu that suits all three. My parents arrived around 1 p.m. They'd driven from Pennsylvania, stayed overnight in Connecticut, and finally arrived on Sunday afternoon, wanting to waste no time.

The Front Room gets nice natural lighting during the day, and though it is usual-

ly full, it never feels overwhelming. We're seated after a few minutes, and mom and I waste no time scoping the drink menu. "Two Apple Cider Mimosas coming right up."

Our meals are a good size, and we end up doing a family buffet. Little mac and cheese here, a little pulled-chicken sandwich there.

Maybe brunch isn't your thing? The Front Room is still a great pick for dinner, though I wouldn't suggest a large group, as the space just isn't cut out for it. It's perfect for a group of four.

## OTTO, OBVIOUSLY

Everyone has his or her favorite location, whether 576 Congress or 225 Congress—usually, it just depends on whether you're in the West or East End at the time. Since moving to Munjoy Hill, I've found myself with fewer options for a happy hour but also completely satisfied with Otto's "slice-for-a-beer" special. Go in between 4 and 6 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and you can sit at the bar and enjoy a dreamy draft with a slice of mashed potato, bacon, and scallion, or maybe a vegetarian slice like the Margherita.



The Gideon Forbes Band comes to Blue on November 28.



The 225 Congress location is a great escape from the busy streets of downtown, and it's large enough for a big group of cousins, grandkids, and siblings. Just you, your honey, and the in-laws? Grab a snug little booth, and share a whole pie. The bar is large enough that even on a crowded evening, you're bound to find seats. When visiting with my own parents, I couldn't tell what my father liked more: seeing meatloaf on a slice of pizza or Sophia Loren hanging

on the walls. You won't find liquor at Otto, which, when family is involved, isn't always a bad thing, but the beers, wine, and ciders go down quite nice.

### BLUE AFTER DINNER

Nothing makes my dad happier than Grey Goose on ice and some good blues. Seeing as it was his first visit to Portland, I wanted nothing more than to make him fall in love with the city that stole my heart. After a day of lighthouses, breweries, and a quick nap, it's time for Portland after dark. We head into Blue, my dad with a clean-shaven head topped with a fedora and my stepmom Mary standing 6'3" in heels with flaming red hair. Fil and I smile as the two draw looks from all corners of the room. We accepted it some time ago that my parents are much cooler than us.

Walking into Blue is a bit of a shock.



## Out&About

Shay's Grill Pub in Monument Square is known for its tasty \$5 martini.

Since I've last been here, the place seems as though it's nearly doubled its size. Now there is much more space for the musicians, with seating between the stage area and a back bar. We take a seat there and happen to run into a good friend of mine and local musician, Viva. She joins our table with her



A prettily garnished Blueberry Fields at Vena's Fizz House.

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date, and the six of us—a number that would have been a squeeze before the renovation—sit back with our nightcaps and enjoy the performances by Samuel James and Dana Gross. Dad is impressed, so much so that he buys another round before the day catches up with all of us.

**MIXING IT UP**

Cocktails and mocktails are his game, and Steve Corman is his name. After a Sunday afternoon stroll in the Old Port, we're looking for a place to stop, refresh, and beer is not on the menu. After a weekend out, we want simple, quiet, and non-alcoholic, please.

At the intersection of Silver and Fore Streets, Fil spots Vena's Fizz House and wants to take a peek, as he's started creating bit of a bar at home and working his own cocktail magic for friends. The man makes a mean margarita.

The front house is a shop of potions, mixers, and elixirs, and we're having a field day going through the tiny bottles. We even start pretending we're in Diagon Alley,

prepping for Hogwarts.

Eventually, a friendly-faced man in square-rimmed glasses makes his way over and asks if we have any questions. Fil seizes the opportunity to inquire about bitters, and so it begins. Steve Corman, who owns the place with his wife, Johanna, whisks us to the back, where an entire bar is set up. We take seats and are offered sodas on the house. As Steve concocts the fizzing brews, he tells us the story of how Vena's began when Johanna woke up one morning with a really, really good idea.

We end up spending nearly an hour as Steve explains and describes different flavors and techniques. The two of us sit there, giddy like children, mesmerized by Steve's showmanship and storytelling.

Before long, another group joins, and Steve tends to their drinks. We say our good-byes and promise to return with every visitor we have. Fil buys us souvenirs. Two mason jars of dried fruits, cinnamon, and crystal clumps of sugar will become Blackberry Maple Lightnings—we simply have to add bour-



bon. And, on Steve's recommendation, we buy a tiny bottle of Dashfire bitters. Let's just say, we've never had more friends wanting to stop for happy hour at our house. ■

FROM LEFT: VENA'S FIZZ; INSTAGRAM @GLOWANDGLITTER; @BAIIS

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