

# Let's Meet *For a* Drink

And how about we shake it up a little?

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

On a golden Saturday, the Old Port is hopping. Cocktail hour is already in full swing. Late-afternoon sun streams through the plate glass into **Portland Hunt + Alpine Club** on Market Street, illuminating the austere decor: long communal tables, filament light pendants, and a long bar lined with backless metal stools. (What's with all the uncomfortable barstools in this town?) A few stools away, a patron picks up his glass of amber liquid garnished with a lime wedge.

"Plantation rum. You could spend an hour sipping this drink—it's that good." He knocks it back instead.

The bartender—a friendly sprite in a plaid shirt—is straining a cloudy concoction into a pair of old-fashioned glasses. "These are **Green Eyes**," she says. "Gin, chartreuse, lime, and a bit of egg white." With a toothpick, she impales a marinated cherry into the center of

a wheel of lime and perches it jauntily on the rim of each glass—green eyes stare back at me.

Plaid-shirted bartenders are part of the tightly curated alpine motif here, as are the folded, faded vintage aerial charts of



Above: Lolita does a brisk Monday Tapas trade, offering a glass of wine with a tasty bite for \$5.

Below: Hunt + Alpine is the place for precision cocktails.



Moosehead Lake with the menu printed on the back, and angular wire sculpture busts of wild game mounted on the walls. You can order popcorn with butter, green chile, and parmesan for five dollars, or brown bread with mushroom butter for three. I ask for a Fernet Branca and soda because I've been told by people half my age that **Fernet**—once considered little more than show-off biters—is all the rage from here to Buenos Aires. The drink arrives in a tall skinny collins glass. It's \$8.50. Hmm.

Next to me, Tatiana and Kate, visiting from Boston, are debating the cocktail menu. "We're eating and drinking our way through Portland this weekend," says Tatiana. They have a small map of the downtown peninsula, with stars on the places they've been. "**Hugo's** last night, we had lunch at **Duckfat** and just had amazing oysters at **Eventide**, and we know we have

to go to **Central Provisions.**" They settle on their drinks, a **White Noise** ("adult soda," \$8.50) and an **In Cold Blood** (whiskey, sweet vermouth, salt, \$11). "Portland is a really popular destination for people in Boston." When I ask whether they're keeping a journal of what they're eating and drinking, Kate says, "We're taking pictures," and holds up her phone.

#### EXTRA POINTS

If you're going to meet for a drink, it's always a little tastier if it comes with a bonus. **Lolita** has Monday Tapas. With every glass of the day's designated wine selection—on our recent visit they were from France's Rhône region—you're given a surprise tapa on the house. Our group sampled two reds and a rose and shared such dazzling treats as marinated eggplant crostini, slices of chorizo braised in cider, spicy meatballs in red

sauce, and patatas bravas drizzled in paprika aioli. To break it down: One person can enjoy two glasses of very decent wine, and enjoy two excellent tapas, for \$10.

**T**he **Little Tap House** on the corner of High and Spring streets calls its signature inducement the B&B—a glass of the featured beer of the day with a free treat for \$5. They're not just free, they're liberating, from braised brisket over corn chips to a quesadilla to a wedge of flatbread pizza.

Three of us arrive to a roaring crowd and manage to grab the last high-top barrel table. But wait—there's been a tap-takeover by a Long Island brewery that has canceled the day's free snacks. We recover from this ghastly setback once our towering goblets of today's special \$4 pinot noir arrive.



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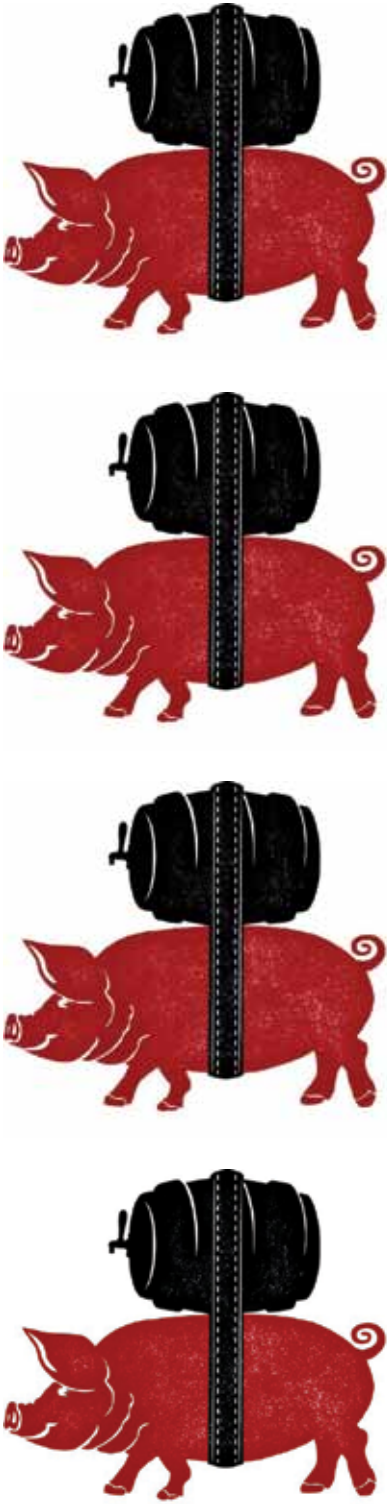
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HAND CRAFTED LINKS & DRINKS



The B&Bs at Little Tap House are always a surprise. In this instance, it's a BBQ pulled-pork taco paired with Bissell Brothers Baby Genius for \$5.

#### BY THE BOOK

"Do you know the *The Cocktail Club*?" a colleague asks.

She's talking about the 2014 hit book by Maureen Christian Petrosky. Petrosky takes the book club concept—and its logical offspring, the wine club (coincidentally also the title of Petrosky's previous book)—and amps it into an empowerment manifesto to bring women together to taste hard spirits.

"We're a group of professional women, and we meet once a month at one of our homes," my friend says. "The book chooses the liquor for each calendar month—gin, whisky, pitcher drinks—and provides cocktail recipes and some food-pairing ideas. Women are doing this all over the country." How do we join here in Maine? A pause. "We have to ask you. Or you could start your own!"

#### ...OR CONSULT AN EXPERT

"I like the **Blue Spoon's** wine time for happy hour," says Kate McCarty, author of *Distilled In Maine* (History Press, 2015) and *Portland Food: The Culinary Capital of Maine* (History Press, 2014).

"Hunt + Alpine has a great cocktail happy hour, and I love their **Saffron Sour**. I love the Mai Tais at Eventide—I've really gotten into tiki drinks lately. **East Ender** also has great cocktails—I love the **Haitian Divorce**, a delicious dark rum and juice thing." East Ender's happy hour runs 3:30 to 5:30 with a special small-plates menu and specialty drinks.

If you like the idea of a women's group, McCarty's got that covered, too. She's a co-founder of the **Portland Spirits Society**, an "appreciation club" for women. Recently, they met "at **Grace** for a bourbon tasting with a Dean's Sweets chocolate truffle pairing, and **Liquid Riot** for an American whiskey tasting—both theirs and others." Check blueberryfiles.com for updates and ticket info.

## HUNGRY EYE

### AND THEN THERE'S SUNDAY

Ricky Nelson greets us at the door—he's listening to the rhythm of the falling rain, and thinking about what a fool he's been—as we walk into **Crooners & Cocktails**, having just spotted the "\$3 Mimosas" sign in the window with the brunch menu. The soundtrack here is tons of fun, if way too loud, and the place is a trip. Cushy barrel chairs, lush cranberry walls, Rat Pack posters, black & white TV, thick table linens, old-time hotel china—and a diverse clientele, most with huge bloody marys (\$5) before them. We decide to split an order of pork belly eggs benedict while sipping bargain mimosas. Tunes like "Eleanor Rigby," "Be My Baby," "Dock of the Bay," and "Do You Love Me?" dance all over the oldies spectrum.

We hear not a single Rat Pack crooner on this visit, although we spot an item on the menu called the "Sinatra Breakfast Sandwich." We snicker, imagining Frank ever in a million years holding an English muffin stuffed with scrambled eggs, pork belly, red peppers, and gruyere. Ring a ding-ding. ■

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