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# Tasting the Town

Ten new ways to sample Portland

BY TRAVIS CURRAN

**N**eed a new reason to visit the Old Port? Just count the cruise ships. To take advantage of all this energy, folks are carving out their own niches in the bricks. Starting a new business (especially a restaurant) is a daring move that merely years ago was considered financially suicidal, and yet look, boom, here they are. New and exciting establishments are sprouting at every turn. The Old Port is in constant flux, so I set out to chronicle the new faces and spaces showing up within this last year. Feel the gentrification, baby.



**“So many new businesses, so many of them restaurants!”**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROBERT WITKOWSKI; JENNIFER KEARNS (2); MEGAN CARTER; JENNIFER KEARNS (4)

## OUT THERE



### THE BEST OF MEXICO IN PORTLAND

Step out of Portland and straight into **Zapoteca**.

The bistro bar is an exciting addition to Portland's Mexican cuisine arena, daring to sizzle with dishes like Ceviche Veracruzano. Owner Sergio Ramos says, "If my ingredients aren't found in Maine, I import them straight from the homeland," including "mole you can't find anywhere else." But let's not forget the selling point: "Ninety-five to 100" high-quality tequilas on deck, "and not one of them is Cuervo." Enjoy them in flights, pairings, or in specialty cocktails like crowd favorite Watermelon Habanero Margarita. "Even people not into peppers love it... the watermelon brings sweet into spicy; it's very successful." Fine tequila is establishing a new market tier, Ramos believes, with margaritas dubbed the No. 1 Mixed Drink in America, topping vodka and scotches. Treat yourself to a Don Julio Real or Sauza Tres Generations Anejo in one of their margaritas or stand into one straight up and neat. 505 Fore St. 772-8232, [zapotecarestaurant.com](http://zapotecarestaurant.com)

### MAKING WHOOPIES

Nearby on Danforth Street sits **Cranberry Island Kitchens**, a small outfit making huge waves when it comes to sweets. Karen Haase creates the "best whoopie pie on the planet." Her secret: "It's my mother's recipe." It could also be the award-winning Kate's Homemade Butter from Old Orchard. And it's not just whoopies here—the 100-year-old buttermilk clam cookie recipe comes straight from Cranberry Island (a gull swoop or two from Southwest Harbor), and she fashions all delicacies in the shape of denizens like mussels, scallops, sand dollars, lobsters, and crabs. Each is modestly priced under \$4. With over 28 fillings, pumpkin cake, Verona chocolate pearls, and an ever-increasing demand, Haase says she "can barely keep up." Ask her about winning Bobby Flay's Throwdown on the Food Network and even making Martha Stewart smile. 52 Danforth St. 774-7110, [cranberryislandkitchen.com](http://cranberryislandkitchen.com)



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PLUSH

Opening page, clockwise from top left: Ginko Blue, East End Cupcake, Sebago Brewing Company, Cobblestones, White Cap, Zapoteca, Sebago Brewing Company, Thirsty Pig, Otto East End

Previous page, clockwise from top left: Gorgeous Gelato, Otto East End, Gorgeous Gelato, Dobra Tea, East Ender, Lithuanian Kielbasa from Thirsty Pig, White Cap, Thirsty Pig

This Page, clockwise: Bubble Maineia, Spicy Chicken Salad from Bubble Maineia, Five Guys, Lovely Things, Thirsty Pig



### DOWN-TO-EARTH ITALIAN

When you stroll down the Old Port and smell that sweet marinara sauce wafting along, head into **The Exchange St. Café**. With roots in East Boston, they master “simple, honest Italian food,” says Michael Goulet. “A real, real easy concept that we grew up with. This was the food in our refrigerators.” And they prove it with modest prices for full-plate portions and staples like Italians, calzones and arancini. “You won’t find arancini like this in Portland,” says chef Kevin Brown. And nothing’s over \$10. Open until 2 a.m., swing by on your night out. Thurs-Sat. 7 Exchange St. 541-9040

### THINKING OUTSIDE THE CUP

Everything in moderation—except cupcakes. Since July, Alysia Zoidis of **East End Cupcakes** has offered “outside of the box” cupcakes like

“chai and cinnamon, lime and avocado, even bacon and maple syrup.” Zoidis rejects the “cutsie” trend of displaying the treats, going for “a more minimalist, modern environment with an edge to it—exposed bricks, corrugated metal.” She also uses “higher quality Italian butter cream. Only butter, never oil...like meringue.” The cupcakes are so good they’re attracting a following: “Cindy Williams loves them.” Pat Corrigan, members of Rustic Overtones, and even Rob Evans of Hugo’s are seen returning to the cupcakes Zoidis calls “decadent, moist, and sweet morsels of luxurious goodness.” Don’t believe it? Try one without smiling. 426 Fore St. 288-3304, eastendcupcake.com

### MONUMENTAL SANDWICH

The challenge to find an impressive sandwich in

*(Continued on page 76)*



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## OUT THERE

*Tasting the Town* (continued from page 37)

Portland is more daunting than one would imagine. Normal sammies are as common as bricks... until you walk into **Cobblestones** in Monument Square. Timbuktu chicken, North African carrot salad hoagies, cubanos, you name it. Or not! With his "creative and unique, fresh sandwiches made to order," owner Craig Rodenhiser loves to surprise. His approach has its roots "in fine dining," he tells me as I sample the Mapleleaf Farms roast duckling with Stilton brie and Asian plum sauce with watercress on a fresh croissant. "I'm trying to translate it to a sandwich, and for a much gentler price." Hunt it down at 15 Monument Square. 699-4338

### CREATIVE SUSTAINABILITY

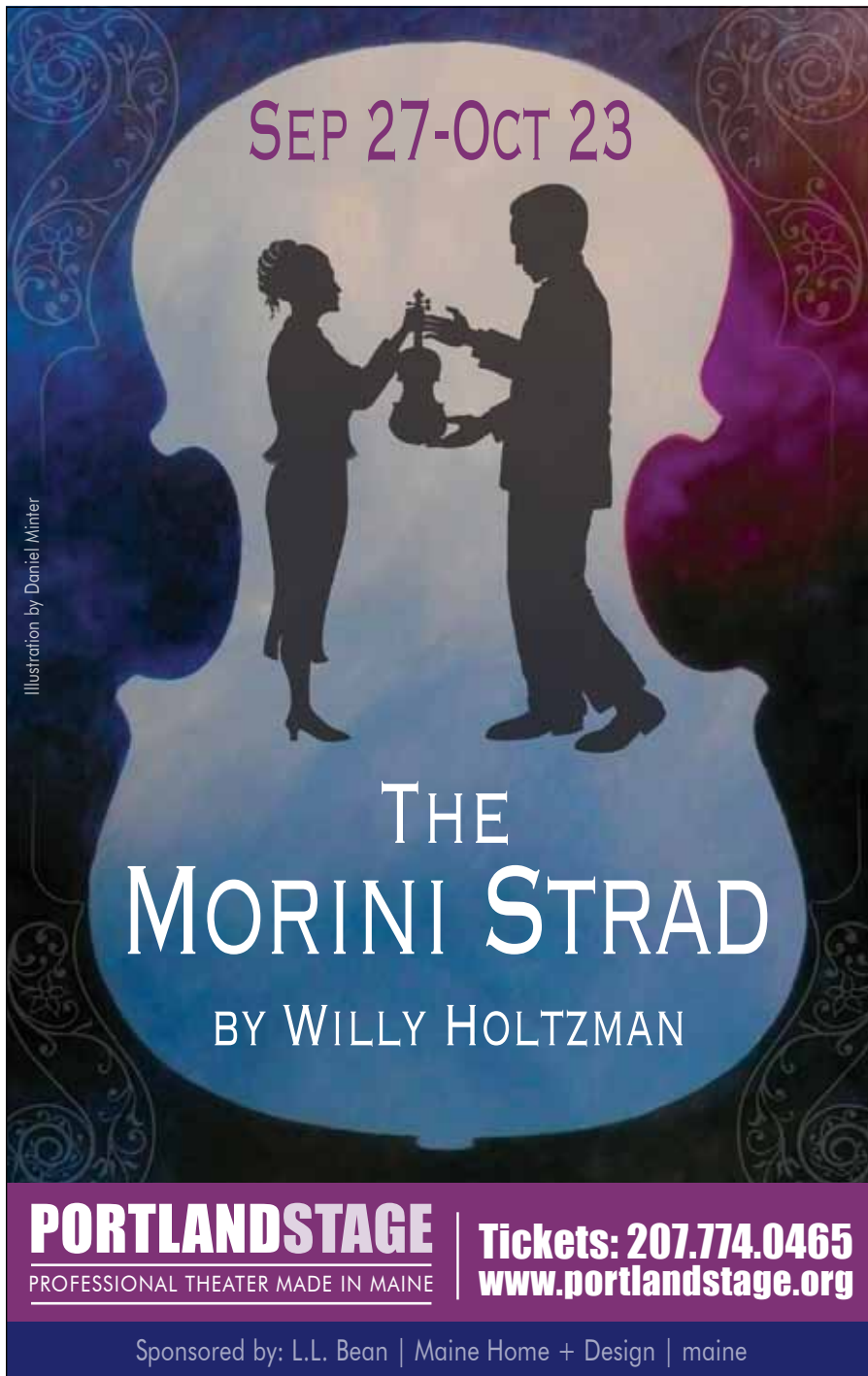
**Figa** is not just another tiny chic place on the Hill. Owner and head chef Lee Farrington presents a globally inspired cuisine. A self-proclaimed "flavor junkie," she'll roast and toast rare spices from Brazil to Indonesia. The menu divides its dimensions into in "Spoons" (\$5-\$10), "Forks" (\$10-\$15), and "Knives" (\$18-\$22) paired with an extensive wine and cocktail list. The house favorite is wild boar rending with apple chutney. Her "recycled-meets-rustic-meets-affordable Nokia" interior is warm and inviting, and it's no surprise the restaurant is almost completely sustainable "short of solar panels on the roof." Farrington even composts everything at home. 249 Congress. 518-9400, figarestaurant.com

### WATCHING WITH YOUR MOUTH FULL

Everyone was curious about what was going on at 164 Middle Street this summer. When the doors opened in mid-July, we happily met the **White Cap Grille**. "It's a real after-work stay-awhile spot," says Mike Boutin, bar manager, "and offers the best people-watching in Portland." Softer than the hustle and bustle of the Old Port, the casual atmosphere complements the huge specialty drink list full of infusions, notably the Basil Roasted Garlic and Scallion infused vodka and the "signature herb-infused Bloody Mary mix made fresh to order." The entrées offer a wave of flavor and options, like sea scallops with saffron aioli and chicken confit with garlic mussels. The "Classic Cocks" are compelling, offering an array of soups, chowders, and chili. Before it's too cold, sit under the red umbrellas, sip a drink on the portico, "and watch the world go by!" 899-1881, whitecapgrille.com

### STOP & SMELL THE SPICES

When you want something relaxed yet crave only the best, **East Ender** is dressed to impress. "Seriously good food in a seriously casual environment" is the motto since opening this year. "We're about innovative food but capturing time-tested classics—New England fare in a French technique," says head chef Mitch Gerow. Buffalo wings that are brined, frenched, and tossed in a cayenne sauce before being fried



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THE MORINI STRAD

BY WILLY HOLTZMAN

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(\$10) is just one way East Ender “elevates everything to the next level.” Imagine a dinner of lobster poutine, duck with honey polenta, or the “Best BBQ ribs in town” (\$19-\$22) on their patio with drinks: you’ll quickly notice this new spot has “a little bit of everything, done correctly.” It’s not a place you just stroll by. 47 Middle St. 879-7669, eastenderportland.com

His **approach** has its **roots** “in **fine dining**,” he tells me as I sample the **Mapleleaf Farms roast duckling** with **Stilton brie** and **Asian plum sauce** with **watercress** on a **fresh croissant**. “I’m trying to **translate** it to a **sandwich**, and for a much **gentler price**.”

**YOU HAVE ENTERED THE COMFORT ZONE**

Sausage, beer, peanuts... on Exchange Street? Yes, and the **Thirsty Pig** pulls it off with grace. This welcoming restaurant serves Maine craft brew, from Allagash to the brand-new Baxter Brewing Co., and succulent sausage plates that are “niche ‘foodie’ but very approachable,” says Allison Stevens. The Lithuanian Kielbasa is a favorite of patrons, with sauerkraut, house-made kielbasa, and gourmet mustard. The back deck is perfect for fall pints during an Old Port walk-about “without all the Old Port stigma.” Enjoy the free peanuts from an antique coffee-bean dispenser, your favorite Maine beer, and exquisite sausages. Case closed! Happy hour is 4-7, \$2.50 Shipyards. 37 Exchange St. 773-2469

**THE FOREFRONT OF CHANGE**

Move between worlds at **15 Exchange Grille**, alive with “Mediterranean tradition and modern international flare.” This bistro tantalizes “all senses and palates,” serving Grilled Mint Pesto Shrimp with halloumi cheese in a cucumber cup and a Mykonos Gyro with tzatziki and pita bread—not a bad start for lunch! At night the restaurant beckons with the fragrance of Coq Au Vin and Ossobuco. For the sommelier in you, slide into their full bar any night and on First Friday Art Walk. “Perk up with a little wine,” says Joe Soley. 15 Exchange St. 774-1595 ■

» For more, visit [portlandmonthly.com/port-mag/2011/09/tasting-the-town-extras](http://portlandmonthly.com/port-mag/2011/09/tasting-the-town-extras)

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