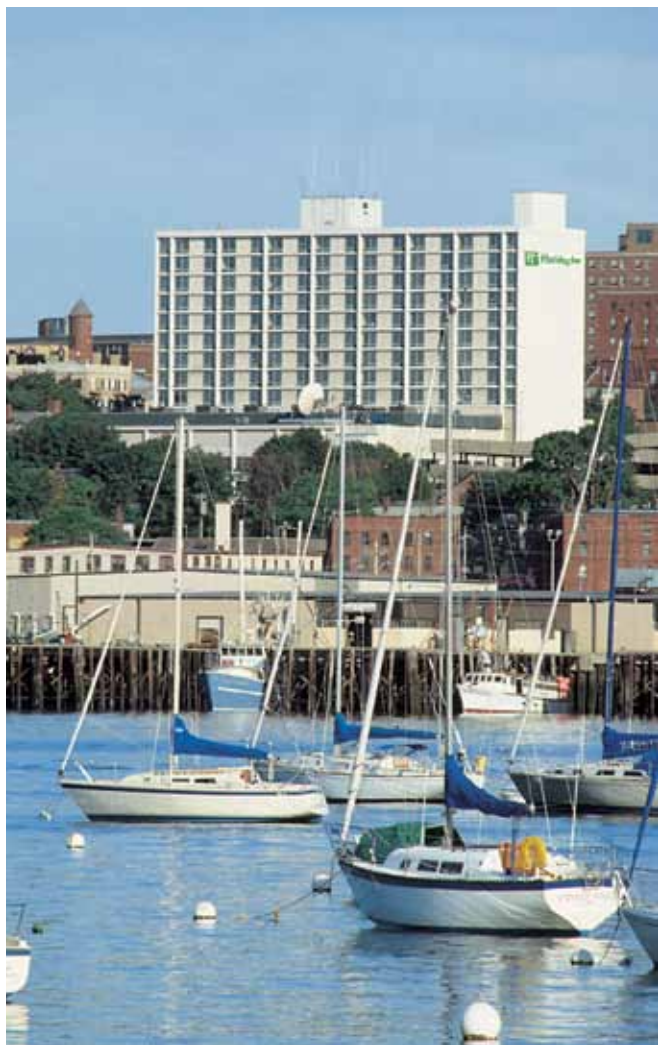


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Small World

Nibble your way through Portland's cocktail hour one small plate at a time. BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Portland's downtown charms are many: walkability, a remarkable mix of ethnic cuisines, independently owned shops, local food, coffee-shop culture, beautifully wrought croissants and bagels, First Fridays, pizza with hipster toppings, movies you can walk to, and a billion art galleries.

Add Happy Hour to the list. Happy hours are nothing new, but for Portland's working classes, they are a quiet gift to be opened and enjoyed at the end of a long day, a way to catch up with a friend, break up the routine and not break the budget, a way to be out, even in the Old Port, before it gets nighttime crazy.

The style may vary, but the rules are simple: Happy hour is not about the weekend; it's about finding a brief oasis Monday through Friday. There should be free food,



HUNGRY EYE

or half-priced appetizers, or some other edible enticement. Discount drink specials are essential.

ROOM TO MOVE

"We've got a pinot grigio, a prosecco, and this montepulciano for \$3 a glass," says Adam, our bartender at the Corner Room on Exchange Street, pointing to them on the wine list. There are many \$3 draft beers as well. He waves a hand to indicate a tidy array of complimentary treats on a counter separating patrons from the open kitchen. Slim glass cylinders of spiced nuts stand along the bar. It's five-ish on a Thursday and the place is already a beehive. We each order a glass of wine and graze on silver-dollar-sized coins of crisp eggplant parm and dainty wedges of spinach mini-quiche with delicate, buttery pastry. Pillow-soft squares of focaccia dusted with herbs and cheese are the work of bakers who "come in every morning at the crack of dawn and do their thing." Every rich bite here is homemade and bright. When we leave at six-ish, the bill for two of us, including tax, is \$6.42. This is such a frugal foodie score that it's easy to play big tipper. "Hey, this is the best happy hour in town," says Adam. He is single-handedly serving the crowd along the bar and making cocktails for the dinner patrons starting to fill the tables. It's worth noting that the Corner Room's sister establishment a few doors down, the Grill Room, observes a similar happy hour.

AWAY FROM IT ALL

Eve's at the Garden in the Portland Harbor Hotel has glasses of excellent pinot grigio and cabernet sauvignon priced at \$5 from 4 to 7 p.m. on weeknights. No free snacks, but a menu of "bar bites" a bit more fancy and substantial, like a plate of house-smoked salmon and a chickpea spread served with

Previous page: Savor fresh air and a happy hour outdoors at the Grill Room on Exchange Street.

This page: \$3 prosecco and a spread of complimentary antipasti are among the happy hour specials at The Corner Room, 4 to 6 p.m.



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HUNGRY EYE

Clockwise from top left: Icy cocktails beckon at the Corner Room; specials at Hot Suppa include \$1 oysters and a \$1 discount on drinks; Hot Suppa's calamari rings make a nice bar snack; their signature "grit fries" served with pesto aioli do, too.



grilled pita bread for \$11. The cushy bar stools and hushed, upscale hotel-bar atmosphere bring the charm and the fun of people-watching the guests. A half hour ago you were at your desk on the clock; now you're on vacation in a distant city. Never mind that an hour from now you turn back into a pumpkin.

Be very Irish on Thursdays and Fridays at friendly Bull Feeney's, also on Fore Street, with \$3 draft beers and discounts on malt whiskeys. Handsome antique wood and brick in this classic Old Port building surround you. Between 5 and 6 p.m. on Thursday and Friday, the kitchen sends out complimentary trays of clever bites like stuffed mushrooms or canapés made with fancy types of bacon and cheese.

At the Irish pub Rí Rá good deals come in the form of daily beer and whiskey specials, plus half-priced appetizers from 4 to 7 p.m.



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HUNGRY EYE



A tasty macaroni-and-cheese fritter and a glass of stout are the nightly \$6 beer-and-appetizer combo special on a recent visit to the Little Tap House.

Hot Suppa on Congress Street offers \$1 oysters and \$1 off beer, wine, and cocktails from 4 to 6 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Just walking into this cheerful little bandbox café can brighten your mood. Parking it at the bar or in the big front window nets you a ringside seat overlooking the Congress Street Irregulars forever strolling to and from Longfellow Square. Mellow out on half a dozen oysters and a head-clearing Sazerac before the show at the State Theatre for \$12.50 plus tax and tip.

It's \$5 margaritas and \$2 Mexican beers from 4 to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday at El Rayo on York Street, and \$4 wine and \$3 beer specials, including half-priced drafts, Thursday and Friday next door at the Cantina. The other enticement is all that fresh-air seating on a warm summer evening.

There's more Mexican mixin' at Margarita's on Brown Street, with drink specials from 4 to 7 p.m., as well as "baby chimis" for \$1 and taquitos for \$3 to graze on. A neat treat for \$5: a cold Dos Equis and a baby chimi.

ALL AROUND TOWN

"From four to seven, Monday through Friday, we have a \$2.50 special on all Shipyard drafts. And \$2.50 pints are pretty popular," says Thirsty Pig owner Allison Stevens. This Exchange Street spot is all about the sausages: 10 varieties made in-house, and one of them is vegan. "The most popular by far is

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the Lithuanian kielbasa," served with slaw or chips as a sandwich for \$8. "But my favorite? Hot and spicy Italian, no contest."

"We pair a beer with a little taster app every day for \$6. Today it's Maine Beer Company's Peeper—one of their summer beers—and a haddock slider," says Little Tap House's bartender Christy, "plus another beer special for \$3. We're adding a daily wine special, too. It's four to six every day."

At Sebago Brewing on Fore Street, the \$6 appetizers from 4 to 6 p.m. (\$5 after 10 p.m.) are popular, notably the "haddock bites." Slip into the cozy niche called the North Point on Silver Street and make your selection from among 22 wines available by the glass. During the 4 to 6 p.m. happy hour these are \$4, and beers are \$3. Perfect with one of the pâtés: smoked salmon, duck, pork, or pheasant. On Monday nights, bottles of wine are half price after 6:00.

Local 188 on Congress Street has a daily vegetable dip served with crostini (\$4) Monday to Thursday, along with \$4 Allagash White pints and wine for \$4 a glass or \$16 per bottle. Over the years, Local has proven itself a fearless innovator of unusually tasty schmears to apply to house-made breads of all sorts.

Neighborhood bar Downtown Lounge on Congress at High Street attracts the cocktail-hour crowd easily with wine and beer specials from 5 to 7 p.m., \$3 well drinks, and half-priced appetizers.

At the Blue Spoon they call it Wine Time (4:30 to 6 p.m., Monday through Saturday) and they make it an oasis of flavor. There are daily wine specials and small-bite treats, most for \$5, that include fried fingerlings with harissa mayo, polenta fritters, and a Turkish feta dip spiced with za'atar.

Credit DiMillo's as a founding member of the free-food happy hour. One of Portland's best cocktail-hour venues anyway, with a huge bar and tables and sofas inside, plus fair-weather deck seating outside overlooking the marina's yachts and the harbor, DiMillo's complimentary spread can be epic. At happy hours, observed from 4 to 7 p.m. weeknights from September through May, you might find a hot crock of chowder flanked by cheese and crackers, crudité and dips, guacamole and chips, fried button mushrooms, wings—and drinks are 50 cents off. Ahoy! ■

➤ For more photos, visit portlandmonthly.com/portmag/2013/06/happy-hour-extras

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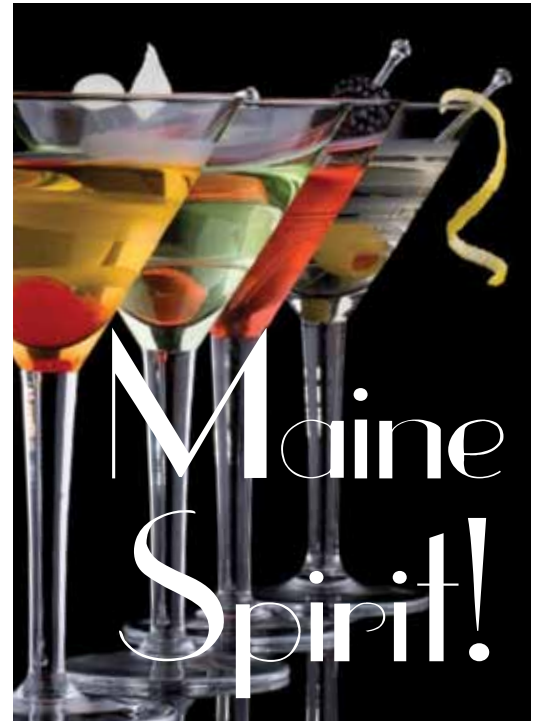
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