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Empire's Lobster Longevity Noodle (wok-fried in the shell, over housemade broad rice noodles), which is available year-round, gets a lazy summer makeover: Lobster Lo Mein is fresh-picked lobster meat, stir-fried with soba noodles, bean sprouts, and broccoli. This comfort-food dish is off-menu, so ask your server.

# Lobster

## With a Twist

Some of the cleverest chefs anywhere ply their trade *here*.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

Maybe we thought it couldn't get any more heavenly than truffled lobster mac & cheese at Five Fifty Five. Maybe we swooned over lobster poutine at Boone's. Maybe sometimes all life lacks is a glass of sauvignon blanc and Di-Millo's lobster roll out on the portside deck in summer.

Think again. As long as we have the best lobsters in the world right here, we'll have Maine chefs dreaming up new thrills for us.

### GRILLED CHEESE WITH BENEFITS

"The **Lobster Melt's** on the lunch and brunch menu year-round," says Karl Deuben, who co-owns and co-chefs with Bill Leavy at the **East Ender**. The popular two-story pub shares the eastern-most and hottest block of Middle Street with Duckfat, Ribollita, and the Hugo's/Eventide/Honey-paw row. "We do it on the Pullman loaf from **Southside Bakery**. We make our bacon jam and a peppadew relish with fen-



## HUNGRY EYE



Evo's chef Matt Ginn won the Maine Lobster Chef challenge at last year's Harvest on the Harbor with this Turkish-style poached lobster with roasted squash and rich, egggy, handmade pasta (left). Among the judges was restaurateur/chef Harding Smith, who pronounced it "remarkable." At right, Empire's Lobster Rangoons. Below, Lobster Lo Maine at the Academe Brasserie in Kennebunk is garnished with crisp bits of pork belly.

nel and other things, and there's **Pineland Farms** jack cheese. Our mayo has lobster stock reduced down to essence. It's a nice sandwich."

### IMPERIAL TREASURES

**W**e're seated alongside a flowerpot forest of jade trees at **Empire** watching Congress Street's usual circus parade. Empire runs like a clock; it has to, because it's almost always busy. The atmosphere

## Shelling Out

It's no secret that Maine is known for its lobster, the red clawed crustacean is practically part of the state's iconography. Now restaurants around the country are cashing in on our lobster's sterling provenance. A Portland-based non-profit recently carried out a report based on a survey of over 7,000 American restaurants. Their findings show that eateries listing **Maine caught lobster** on their menus will charge on average \$6.22 more for the dish.

With restaurants showing an increased interest in food sourcing, top chefs are drawn to the sustainability and local credentials of the Maine catch. And it seems diners are more than happy to fork out the extra for such a premium product.

Now that's some elite lobster.





is simple, elegant, and precise. The chopsticks are red lacquer, not disposable.

Our waitress sets down a square dish on which four crisp **Lobster Rangoons** (\$8) stand at attention. They're exceptional, filled with hot, fluffy cream cheese spiked with minced lobster and tiny bits of tobiko roe and scallion. Portland is where everything can be made more fabulous when it's made with lobster.

Our server returns with a bamboo basket holding three steamed **Lobster Dumplings** (\$9). We're still exclaiming over the tasty rangoons.

"You picked some of the best things," she murmurs, slipping away.

#### GO EAST

"One **Maine Roll**," commands **Yosaku's** owner and sushi master extraordinaire. Takahiro Sato stands tall, bespectacled, and perfectly straight behind the gleaming sushi bar, working in a line with his minions, deftly rolling, filling, garnishing, and plating seafood. In a moment, a Maine maki sushi roll appears.

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## HUNGRY EYE



Eventide on Middle Street serves up a lobster roll a light-as-air bun, filled with lobster that's been quickly sautéed in brown butter.

Five perfect cylinders bound with ribbons of black nori seaweed are arranged artfully on a square plate with red-leaf lettuce, pale slices of pickled ginger, and a pyramid of wasabi completing the garnish. Dainty asparagus tips and pincers of lobster claw meat rise up from the rice, avocado, and julienned cucumber in each slice. The perfect Japanese lobster roll is as far east as you can travel from a lobster shack roll—and it's delicious. It's \$10.50.

"We make a lot of these," says Taka-san.



## FRISKY BISQUE

It's no secret that Maine **Lobster Bisque** is one of our rewards for living in a place where it might snow in April. At shiny new **Scales** on Commercial Street they've taken bisque someplace truly exotic.

"There's been a little bit of blow-back," says chef Michael Smith. "You know, that we're not making the sludgy version with a ton of cream. Traditional food is like Thanksgiving food—people have their set expectations.

"We make the lobster stock with the shells. We use tomatoes. The base is onion, celery root, thyme, bay leaf, a little smoked paprika, and sunchoke [Jerusalem artichoke]. I like what sunchoke and lobster do together. We deglaze with a good *fino* sherry. We only add a bit of cream before serving."

Scales's bisque is spicy, nuanced, and more exciting than its simple Yankee forebear—as if the soup pot had snuck off to Marseille on vacation. But it's served with house-made, hexagonal, flaky-crisp oyster crackers, as if to promise you it hasn't forgotten where it comes from. It's \$9 a cup.

## THE GOLDEN ROLL

Seafood flies out of **Eventide's** kitchen pretty much constantly starting around noon. It's also around noon that every seat and stool is occupied and will likely remain so until closing time at midnight. It takes a

# TRY THIS

If you're lucky enough to run into the guys from High Roller Lobster Co. at one of their usual haunts (hint: it's probably a brewery), you'll be torn between the fail-safe classic lobster rolls and the intriguing rotating specials. Look out for lobster cake burgers, lobster bagel, and their delectable "xo buns"—steamed rice buns, tender lobster, and spicy seafood and alioli sauce to garnish. "There's also our secret menu item, The Big Rig. Our take on a Big Mac, it's a bun with lobster, bacon, and crab cake!" says co-owner Baxter Key.



Bayside American Café makes a mean lobster eggs benedict (left). Harbor Fish Market attracts the tourists, and it's the go-to spot for locals and chefs to pick up fresh seafood.

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## HUNGRY EYE

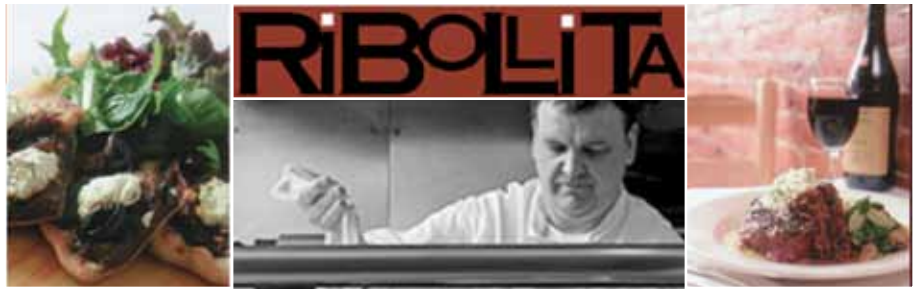
good-sized staff to keep this machine running as smoothly as it does. A bartender, a cold-plate garnishing ace, and a ponytailed whippet shucking oysters are in perpetual motion. Servers crisscross the floor with lobster rolls, fancy crudo, foamy draft beers, and tray upon tray of oysters resting on beds of crushed ice and rockweed.

**T**he **Eventide Brown Butter Lobster Roll** is now so ridiculously popular that it's trademarked on the menu. "We took the mayo version off the menu," says my server. "It was like, why bother?" When asked how many brown butter rolls they'll make for this Saturday lunch, she says, "Oh, I don't know. Maybe 300?"

The roll is steamed and tender, a feather-weight vessel for the lobster meat—bathed in sweet, nutty brown butter—that's piled into it. A manageable splurge of a \$14 lunch.

### THEY ASK WHY NOT

Shanna and Brian O'Hea, chefs and owners of the **Academe Brasserie & Tavern** in the **Kennebunk Inn**, know how to have



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## HUNGRY EYE



fun with the beautiful dishes they create. Their award-winning **Lobster Pot Pie** has been featured on the Food Network show *Best Thing I Ever Ate* and the Travel Channel's *Food Paradise*. Poached lobster meat, peas, corn, potatoes are topped with pastry. "Yes I do make the puff pastry, and it's hand rolled—very old school," says Shanna. "And yes, Lobster Pot Pie will forever be on our menu."

But why stop there? "Now we have our **Lobster White Truffle Pizza** which was featured in *Oprah Magazine*. We also have our **Lobster Lo Maine**—chilled lobster and miso noodles garnished with crispy Asian pork belly." ■

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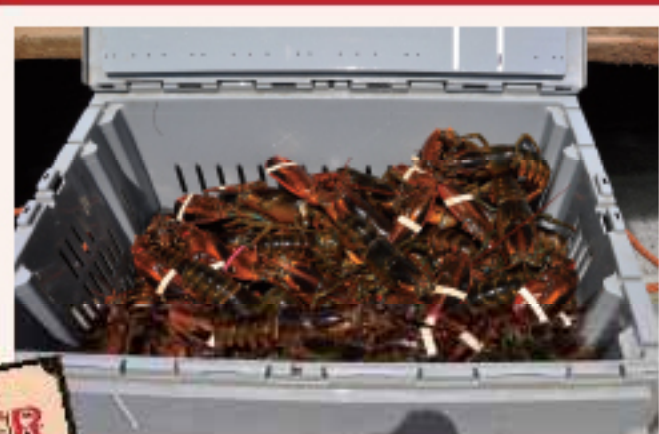
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