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Tables for Two

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BY OLIVIA GUNN

We walk into Salvage with no idea how large the barbecue joint actually is. We were hoping to catch some live music, drink a few beers, and pick at some ribs, but not tonight. There are far too many people here—the entire bar is lined with folks sitting shoulder to shoulder. I’m not about to fight my way through, so we head next door to the tiny Thai house where Christmas lights hang year-round.

Saeng Thai House is cozy and perfect for two-person parties. With maybe 10 small tables, you’ll probably never find a family or reunion of friends there, which makes it all the more special to me. It’s intimate because of the size but feels more like grandma’s kitchen than



Out&About Almost any night is a busy night at Pai Men Miyake.

FROM TOP: MEAGHAN MAURICE (2); ALL-FREE-DOWNLOAD.COM



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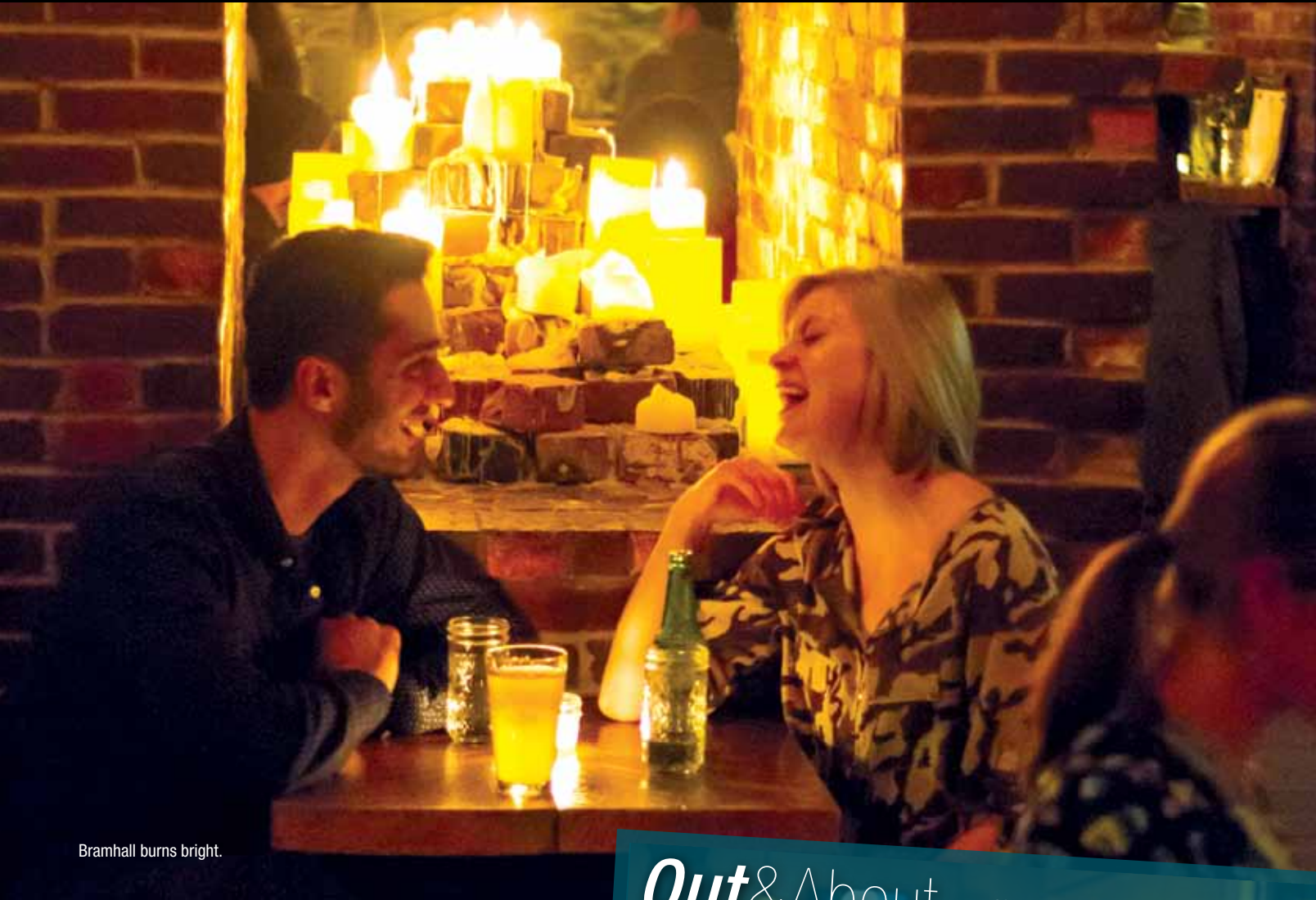


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Bramhall burns bright.

other spots like Mi Sen that can feel a little too sterile.

Saeng Thai doesn't serve alcohol but has a BYOB policy. We consider a quick beer run but settle on a hot Thai tea. No drinks tonight. Our Basil Pad Thai arrives still steaming, and soon, along with the rest of the patrons, we're in silence, devouring.

The matriarch appears from the back of the kitchen, scans the faces for satisfaction, and gives her orders. A moment later she's disappeared in a billow of smoke, back into the kitchen. I can't help picture my own grandmother standing over the table, making sure my cousin gets enough gravy or my sister gets sweet potatoes.

Though there are hipper spots and fancier menus with cocktails we can't pronounce, Saeng Thai feels like home. And on a February night in Portland, sometimes that's what you need.

HIDEOUT ON CONGRESS STREET

In the basement of the old Roma Cafe, the new **Bramhall** is an unexpected refuge on Congress Street. We walk from Monument Square trying without luck to avoid the Friday Art Walk crowds as we begin our trek back to-

Out&About

The Little Tap House is a go-to for small plates and local brews after work.



FROM TOP: FILIPP KOTSISHEVSKIY; MEAGHAN MAURICE



Fore Street's bar has been a date destination for nearly 20 years.

ward State. I'd overheard at a holiday party that there was a new "secret" bar on Congress. Hoping to find it before the other 30 people who overheard this secret, we agree tonight seems as good a night as any.

"It's past the Rite Aid but before Salvage. At least that's what she said." [In another life, Portlanders used to base their directions on the legendary Roma Cafe, which held court above the rathskeller we're heading for.]

We baby-step along the sheet of ice that's claimed the sidewalk and are about to give up after a minor slip when we spot a group of friends heading into the basement of 767. We decide to follow them, casually nodding our hello.

We hang our coats in the foyer and pull open the door, anxious to know just where we've ended up. It swings open, and we're blown in by a gust of cold. Some patrons glare at the shocking chill.

Bramhall is dimly lit with stone walls and small tables. The bar is full, so we take a spot in the center of the room. Behind a giant stone pillar is another area cut off from the rest. Perfect for couples wanting more privacy, but we're happy enough to have found seats.

It seems to be the spot for pairs and pairs of pairs. Couples and double dates surround us, all engaged

in private conversations. It's nice to see people looking at one another, no alien iPhone glows illuminating their faces.

Bramhall isn't really a secret, or at least it won't be for long, but I imagine the crowd it draws will always be those looking to escape the hustle. Couples who can sit and discuss the day without checking emails, the nine-to-fivers who needs a little quiet time before heading home, and every now and then the curious travelers looking for a warm burrow and strong drink.

JAZZY LADY

The Bearded Lady's Jewel Box is my new favorite bar. It's where I'll bring friends, family, even enemies just to spend more time there.

Located at 644 Congress Street, you might miss it if you're not careful. Searching for it myself, I peer into darkened windows until my companion and I are finally pointed in the right direction. We enter a surprisingly large space with a loft hovering above the bar, tall ceilings, and a funky Regency-style mural on the wall. It looks empty for being the talk of everyone in town. I start to wonder if anyone really *does* know where it is.

Either way, we're happy. The less the merrier in our book. Our bartender is friendly



Nathaniel Meiklejohn at The Bearded Lady's Jewel Box.

Portland's Only All-Suite Waterfront Hotel

and offers us antique-framed menus. "How many of these have broken?" I ask, careful not to shatter it myself. "A few. Everything is pretty old and fragile in here."

We browse over the week's cocktails that go for \$10. I end up choosing a glass of 'red.' Another bartender brings a tiny sample to taste, but I admit I can normally drink whatever Trader Joe's has in a box. Both bartenders laugh and step aside to reveal exactly that. They've just run out of bottled wine and have Trader's on reserve. It's a perfect moment to introduce ourselves, and we discover we're meeting Nathaniel Meiklejohn, the Bearded Lady himself, owner of the bar.

We chat a while, he about starting his own spot after working at Local 188 and we about moving to Portland not so long ago. As evening settles, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone keep a calming soulful vibe rolling throughout the bar.

After our first round, we try a beer brewed specifically for the Jewel Box by In'finiti, on the house. We chat among ourselves and between bartenders and eventually promise to be back for their next dance party.

The Jewel Box isn't trying to be the new hot spot in Portland but rather a peaceful haven for locals. For that reason alone, it may soon find itself busy every night.

A FRIENDLY BREW

After a day of work, sometimes it's best to ditch the frills and head to **Sebago** for soft pretzels and beers. With 5 p.m. behind us, coworkers, friends, and couples join for happy hour on the corner of Fore Street at Franklin Arterial. The Brewpub is one of the larger restaurants in the Old Port so there's always room. We take a booth near the back, each of us facing TVs. Not the most romantic, but there are nights when all you need is the company and can omit any conversation. We're apparently not the only couple with that idea, because the majority of people are watching ESPN as 1990s pop/rock plays around us. Our \$5 pretzels arrive piping hot, providing another reason for silence. Nothing wrong with taking a break and simply being. We'll soon be home with chores to do and dinner to make, but for now we can sit in a bar and pretend we've got nowhere else to be.

OUT & ABOUT IN DARKEST WINTER

We're gallery hounds. This evening, we're




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at a **Photo A Go-Go** event at The Bakery Photo Collective in a giant gallery that's part of the Dana Warp Mill in Westbrook. Photo A Go-Go is an opportunity for local photographers to get together, network, and enjoy an evening of celebrating their work. Local artists donate photographs to be auctioned off, and the money raised goes back to the Collective. We arrive to a packed gallery of photographers and their families, friends, and fans. Everyone looks great, and it's refreshing to see people out and about in the dark of winter. A live band plays as we move through the gallery, deciding which photography we'll bid on. Fil's work is gathering a small crowd, and we can't help but watch for their reactions.

Beers, snacks, and the exhibit jump-start our Friday night. We're energized by the huge photography community and pumped to get back into our own creative work.

Around 7 p.m., we head back to Portland to celebrate with dinner in the West



Dinner is served at Caiola's.

End. We'd been to **Caiola's** ages ago for a wedding reception and were happy to find that it's now only a few blocks from where we ended up living. The restaurant looks much smaller than it really is, but the coziness of the front dining area draws us in, even without a warm welcome from anyone. When we arrive we're told we can either wait for a half an hour for a table or take two seats at the bar. We choose the bar and sit next to a group of women who appear to have been going at some dirty martinis for a while who either don't notice us or have decided to ignore us. Either way, we make ourselves comfortable. I order a glass of wine and Fil a beer to accompany our chicken marsala and lamb chop with roasted Brussels sprouts.

Caiola's is a great restaurant for a small family dinner or double date. We wonder if it would be welcoming to a lone diner as we enjoy our dinner and drinks. We don't stay for a night-cap and head to Ruski's instead. ■

FILIPP KOTSISHEVSKIY

Thank you!

On our one year anniversary, we want to thank the entire Southern Maine community who have welcomed us with open arms. We have a great appreciation for this vibrant, close-knit community who have made our first year so remarkable. To our families - thank you for giving us the privilege to care for your loved ones.

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