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The Curtain Call

Starved for a night of entertainment? Candy from the concession stand just won’t cut it. Instead, try elegant dining before or after curtain at these go-to watering holes.

By Karen Hofreiter

With electric performances ahead, from Golden Dragon Acrobats (April 6) to Annie (April 27); Tony Bennett (May 11) to Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique (May 16); to a storm of sound from Riverdance (May 31) at Merrill Auditorium; Bridget Kearney (of Lake Street Dive) at the State Theatre (April 17); Portland Jazz Orchestra at One Longfellow Square (April 20); and String Around My Finger at Portland Stage (through April 23), there’s never been a better time to add a first or final act to your evening’s headline sensations. Whether your preference is a pre-show opening snack, post-curtain call nightcap, or late afternoon matinee bite, Portland’s vivacious dining scene offers plenty of star options.

Industry Favorite
If you’re looking to add a little extra drama to your night in the audience, there’s nothing like sitting and sipping under a glowing golden dragon. Situated close to State Theatre and One Longfellow Square, sleek Bao Bao Dumpling House has everything you need to set the scene. Sample steaming plates of hearty Asian fare (shrimp and bacon dumplings, anyone?); cocktails by the bowl (you’ll see Scorpions aren’t just for college kids); and, as Bao Bao’s Chris Peterson puts it, a selection of “wonderful but often overlooked” desserts. If you’re in a pre-show rush, “there are quite a few menu options [Somen noodles arrive in a hurry] that can get you in and out in enough time to catch the curtain.” Post-show, Bao Bao (open till 11 p.m.) is a “super fun way” to stretch your evening. But if you’re still not convinced, just ask the hard-working and heavy-lifting stage crews who stop by Bao Bao to fuel up for the long night and wind down afterward.
CULTURE & COCKTAILS

Heading uptown, just a skip across Congress Street from Merrill Auditorium, you’ll find the tweedy Inkwell Bar within The Press Hotel. According to Derek Hunt, the “lively but relaxed lounge-style atmosphere and cozy seating by the fireplace” make the old-school media-themed bar the perfect mise-en-scène. Beyond the artistic small plates, patrons will find cocktails to match the evening’s theme. For example, “a dramatic and fancy evening calls for a twist on the classic Manhattan, which describes our Just North Of drink (rye whiskey, B&B, Luxardo, dry vermouth/bitters)—a reference to our location 312 miles north of Broadway and 42nd.” Ahead of a show, don’t miss Inkwell’s “Off the Record” happy hour (Su.-Th. 4-6 p.m. and 10 p.m.-1 a.m.), with $5 select local craft beers on draft and wines.

Only a three-minute stroll from Merrill, a leisurely stop at Dobra Tea is the perfect way to extend an afternoon matinee or start an evening on a zen note. Swathed in rich hues of burgundy and turquoise with Persian-style rugs and floor-pillow seating, it’s “a great space to relax and unwind and the perfect place for conversation with friends or relaxing with the whole family,” says co-owner Ray Marcotte. (Actors from Portland Stage frequently stop by pre-performance to get “into the zone.”)

Over 100 tea varieties mean everyone will find something to soothe or energize, from chocolate-laced comfort teas (try the “Memories of Prague” made with Black Assam tea mixed with semi-sweet chocolate) to hearty and invigorating blends (the “Taste of Kashmir,” a mix of green, black, and oolong teas with orange peel, cloves, ginger, and cinnamon). And since no one wants to provoke disapproving sidelong glances with a rumbling tummy, don’t leave without a bite of something decadent like a matcha cheesecake, currant scone, or chocolate-drizzled macaroons.

SET THE STAGE

If the tickets in your hand are for a performance at Portland Stage, the Little Tap House is less than a four-minute stroll (six minutes with heels) through the colorful Arts District. With white stucco and exposed brick walls, the rustic-modern locale combines a neighborhood-pub feel with an upscale aesthetic—perfectly suited for an evening of artistic and intellectual stimulation. (It even lured in Bernie Sanders for a post-rally indulgence of fish and chips.)

“The Little Tap House is a cozy nook to hang your hat before or after an event. Feel the warmth of the wood interior and comfort of friends around you while listening to some jamming tunes,” says Robin Landry. “The beer connoisseur is bound to find a favorite local brew or special one-off style to sip on. If the concert falls on ‘date night,’ sharing a local beer flight is a romantic way to have an enjoyable tasting experience together.” More than just a beer haven, Little Tap House’s cocktail creations like the Maple Manhattan (Knob Creek whiskey, Aztec chocolate bitters, Maine maple, sea salt rim) are core-worthy.

DON’T MISS

Over on the East End, the St. Lawrence Arts Theater isn’t the only place with a flair for the dramatic. Petite, crimson Lo-lita is a beloved spot for local theater-goers. The small plates menu lends itself to a quick bite pre-performance, and the kitchen is open until 10:30 p.m. for a post-show feast. Stella Hernandez, co-owner and wine director, describes the self-styled “Vinoteca and Asador” as “warm and urban, but decidedly low-key.” Cocktails sipped at the zinc bar are a must. Hernandez recommends the Bijou cocktail (gin, green Chartreuse, sweet vermouth, orange bitters)—“complex and herbaceous with a lovely, opulent color that is very much about drama.”

Not to be outdone, South Portland’s Portland Players is surrounded by great pre-show spots, including the laid-back Elsmere BBQ, with its fascinating auto-garage-chic interior; David’s 388, with its warm hues and urban-cottage feel; and the bright and airy Italian spot, Enio’s Eatery.
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