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Lobster With a Twist

Some of the cleverest chefs anywhere ply their trade here.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

M aybe 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 Deubben, 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

7 6  p o r t l a n d  m o n t h l y  m a g a z i n e

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.

IMPERIAL TREASURES

We’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

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, eggy, 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.

It’s a nice sandwich.”

cel and other things, and there’s Pineland Farms jack cheese. Our mayo has lobster stock reduced down to essence.
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.
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 somewhere 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 sunchokes [Jerusalem artichoke]. I like what sunchokes 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 forbear—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

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.

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.
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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.

The 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 featherweight 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
Hook's Lobster Dinner
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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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