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What do you think when you enter a restaurant and see art—paintings on the walls, sculpture in the gardens, smaller pieces of artwork propped up here and there? Do you wonder if the art is for sale, or does it seamlessly become part of the decor in your mind’s eye?

Many of us experience it as part of the ambiance. Often, however, the art we are dining with is for sale, and the venue actually doubles as a gallery.
ART HABITAT

This is a new venture for us,” Jennifer Lewis says of her family-owned Clay Hill Farm in Cape Neddick. The restaurant, the first ever to be recognized by the National Wildlife Federation as a bird sanctuary and wildlife refuge, sits on 11 acres of rolling lawns, colorful gardens, and protected woodlands. “We have the space to bring the outside in. With our herbs and gardens, we bring ingredients in with our food, but being here is so experiential. I wanted to expand the boundaries and long dreamed of creating a sculpture garden on these beautiful grounds.” In April of this year, she serendipitously discovered sculptor Patrick Pierce (pictured on previous page) while meeting with his wife Kathleen Deely Pierce of the Maine Restaurant Association. Pierce launched into the sculpture project with vigor, creating Dreams Feed Me (on view through November 2018). “I love the longevity of the site, a farm since 1794 that is nature-forward,” Pierce says. “I like adding energy; it’s a collaboration with nature that opens the way toward participation.”

Inside Clay Hill is the newly opened VerandArt, a gallery situated in one of the smaller dining rooms. It’s “perfect to showcase one artist’s collection with festive openings every six to eight weeks,” Lewis says. “Celebrating artists is a way to support the community and share ideas. A certain kind of person will be drawn to a gallery, but here at Clay Hill people are coming in for food. Then they see the art. We are able to bring this gift to people who might not even know they need it.”

ON THE TABLE, ON THE WALL

The Good Table’s proprietor, Lisa Kostopoulos, started exhibiting art for personal reasons. “For years, dominated by old photos and antique bric-a-brac, the decor was dubbed by one reviewer as antiquated,” Kostopoulos says. “That got me going. Plus, I love living with my art at home.” Working with Portland artist Marilyn Blinkhorn, Kostopoulos redesigned the restaurant, gracing the walls with Blinkhorn’s striking paintings brimming with rocks, waves, and meadows. It presents a sense of place similar to the restaurant’s setting in Cape Elizabeth. “I was going to have rotating shows, but I couldn’t part with the work.” She bought the entire show for $3,000. In 2013, she designed a bar with “fabulous blue walls” ideally suited for hanging the work of other artists, too. “The shows rotate every six to eight weeks. The work sells. My staff and I buy, as well as the diners.” But Kostopoulos does not take commissions, saying, “I feel like I am getting the gift.”

For Stacy Cooper of Biscuits & Company in Biddeford, the decision to exhibit art was made “the minute we opened.” Rotating once a month, openings are timed for Biddeford’s First Friday Artwalk. “I wanted this restaurant to be part of a community where people could see art and hang out,” Cooper says. “It’s like you’re coming...”

— Mary Allen Lindemann

“Artists want it. We are giving people equal access to showing art and a chance to try something new.” — Mary Allen Lindemann
to your eccentric aunt’s kitchen.” A recent show demonstrates this. "Portland artist Dave Cray did a daddy/daughter collaborative. He started the canvas, then asked his two-year-old to paint next or tell him what to paint in. Two little girls and their parents loved the painting. It had elephants, balloons, and was very colorful and whimsical. Admiring it each visit, when the show came down, they bought it ($400) for their beach house." Brokering the sales, Cooper’s commission is a small 10 percent. “This is not about the money for us,” she says.

On view at Bonobo in Portland through September 9 is another family collaboration—by Lauren Almarode and Sandi Lemmerman, a mother-and-daughter team. A small magical painting, Mountain Landscape, created by nine-year-old granddaughter Bela Almarode, is included. Offered $100 for it by a smitten buyer at the opening, Bela declined. “I like having the painting with me,” she says.

Union Restaurant at the Press Hotel hosts openings of quarterly exhibits on its lower floors—a designated, well-designed space. Curated by Erin Hutton, director of programming at MECA, the works are not officially for sale by Press Hotel, but Carla
Tracy of the hotel says she’s “heard that artists have sold work as a result of being viewed here.” September’s show features artist Michel Droge and opens with a public reception on First Friday, September 7.

THE COMMUNITY CANVAS
“The whole plan was to promote artists,” says Jeannie Dunnigan on opening CIA Café in South Portland (and a second in Saco last year). An artist herself, Dunnigan sold art prior to becoming a restaurateur and “designed the space like a gallery, with professional lighting and installations.” Showing over 40 artists who sell pottery, jewelry, and original handmade items, CIA’s art sales generated $140,000 at the two locations in 2017. “I love sending checks to people who create art,” Dunnigan says. Drawing colorful, animated crowds, CIA’s celebrated openings spill onto the streets. “If they don’t buy then,” Dunnigan says, “one day they’ll come in for a sandwich and leave with something like a hand-carved whale.”

Soon after opening their doors in 2010, Local Sprouts, a worker-owned cooperative, began hanging shows that rotate every four weeks. “The interest in working with Maine artists is in line with our mission to serve meals with Maine ingredients,” says member Alexa Clavette. “Wanting to display art that we’re passionate about, we often reach out to community support programs, such as Bomb Diggity Arts, to put together group or solo shows.

AN ORIGINAL
An early pioneer in the restaurant art scene was Local 188. In the late 1990s, Local’s owners, Alison and Jay Villani, ran Pleas-
ant Street Collective, a gallery in Portland. Exhibiting work by artist **Patrick Corrigan**, they sold almost everything off the walls. Inspired by this success, the group opened Local 188 as a restaurant/gallery in May of 1999. “Since then,” says current curator **Jenny Gardiner**, “Local has exhibited rotating shows non-stop.”

“**J**ay is a staunch supporter,” Gardiner says. “He purchases a lot of work.” Though they receive regular inquiries, Local does not actively seek artists. “Not everything is going to work here,” Gardiner says. “It’s dark at night, so if the art is subtle or small it might not show well. We go with what comes our way and what makes sense.” New shows open every six to eight weeks, and the pricing is displayed next to the art or in a separate folder. On view now is **Nina Hope**, a self-taught artist who creates “little worlds she’d like to visit herself.”

An even earlier forerunner, and one of the first to commit to showing and selling art, is **Coffee by Design**. “We opened in 1994 at a time when the recession had hit galleries so hard,” owner **Mary Allen Lindemann** says. “It was clear that artists needed alternative exhibition space, so we simply provided that.”

With galleries proliferating in recent years, CBD asked itself, “How do we keep our connection to the arts relevant? Do we still show artwork? Are we actually adding or defeating?” The answer, Lindemann says, was loud and clear, “Artists want it. We are giving people equal access to showing art and a chance to try something new. Artists tell me that showing their work in our public space provides an opportunity for it to be seen and possibly purchased by a large and varied audience.”

As for us diners, we have no problem bringing another sense to the table. Besides, sometimes our eyes are bigger than our stomachs.