“Beyond Lobsters and Lighthouses”

Enjoying Portland, Maine, in the “off-season”

by NELL PORTER BROWN

Forget lounging on the beach, and suit up instead to explore Portland, Maine, this winter. This dining haven and creative hub might be a lot quieter—and a lot colder—admits longtime resident John Robinson ’90, a novelist and author of A Concise History of Portland, Maine (2008), but the arts and culinary scenes are thriving.

Theaters, museums, and music halls are all open, as are downtown’s boutiques, cafes, and night clubs. There’s also trekking along the scenic Portland Trails and ice-skating at Thompson’s Point. “People gravitate to Portland in the winter to enjoy the lights, hit the art galleries on the First Friday Art Walks, check out the local microbreweries, and go skiing,” Robinson adds; the city offers anyone “a fun, romantic getaway.”

Or, just come to graze. Portland—rightly named “2018 Restaurant City of The Year” by Bon Appétit—is packed with bakeries, bars, and restaurants, serving everything from South American arepas to fresh ale and oysters to five-course, farm-to-table feasts. “You can’t even get a seat at most places in the summer,” Robinson reports, but “right now, through the end of March, you can walk in and sit at a bar, or get a table any time.”

Do plan ahead, however, for the tenth annual Maine Restaurant Week (March 1-11). The popular event draws crowds by offering specially priced menus, inventive cocktails, and impromptu parties; it’s the perfect op-
ALL IN A DAY: Sliding Down the Slopes

Need one good reason to get outside and embrace the cold? Snow tubing. The slick rides are like sledding—on steroids. No special skills are required. And the colder it gets, the faster you’ll fly down the slopes: at speeds of up to 20 miles per hour. “As the snow freezes more, it gets a little icier,” says Alex Cole, a manager at Nashoba Valley Tubing Park, in Littleton, Massachusetts. There, 18 tubing lanes, each nearly a quarter of a mile long, are packed with man-made (and some natural) snow and extend along two sides of the hill, at a 100-foot vertical drop.

The park—the largest snow-tubing venue in New England—is part of the family-run Nashoba Valley Ski Area, founded in 1964. Tubing lanes opened on an adjacent hill in 2001, and quickly became a popular intergenerational winter activity. Families and kids come in droves, especially during school-vacation weeks, but so do groups of young adults and “the occasional older couple,” Cole adds. “We have thousands of people every week for tubing; in a season, we could see 50,000.” Tips: go early or late in the day to avoid crowds; two-hour individual tickets are $35; group-rate discounts are available; and night-time tubing, until 10 p.m., ups the thrill factor.

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Other snow-tubing sites close to Boston include Ski Ward, in Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, and McIntyre Ski Area, in Manchester, New Hampshire. Those are smaller and perhaps tamer, but nonetheless offer fresh air and exercise, human contact, and a fun day out: all helpful combatants against winter doldrums.

Tubing at Nashoba Valley Ski Area

~N.P.B.
1952-1970” (through February 17) and “Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Images of the Caribbean Archipelago” (opening February 1), which explores the fluid boundaries and themes in Latin American art.

The ICA’s “Drawing Now” exhibit (opening January 17) features a mind-boggling array of works by members of the Drawing Collective, along with guest contributors Josefina Auslender, Kevin Townsend, and Michael Winkler.

On February 17, Creative Portland and the Merrill Auditorium present the inaugural performance-artist showcase “Hear, Here!” “It’s an opportunity for families and everyone to come and see extraordinary talent that they might not have seen before,” Minot says, “either because these artists are on the road during the summer season, or because they’ve recently moved here, attracted by this arts sector. Because this is a destination, beyond lobsters and lighthouses, for people interested in a rich cultural life.”

For more music, check out the historic State Theatre—Walk The Moon, creators of the pop-tune “Shut Up and Dance,” appears January 31—or celebrate Valentine’s Day with a concert by jazz pianist Joey Alexander. More intimate is the Port City Music Hall, where Alsarah & The Nubatones, fronted by the Sudanese-American singer, songwriter, and ethnomusicologist, perform on January 17. Portland’s bars, like The Thirsty Pig, Blue, and the Rí Rá Irish Pub and Restaurant, also host bands and other concerts, as does the Portland House of Music.

This season, The Portland Stage Company presents The Importance of Being Earnest (January 22-February 17) and The Half-Light, a new drama by Monica Wood about “the ghosts that live within us all” (February 26-March 24).

Between shows, there’s plenty of time to tuck in at Portland’s excellent restaurants. Track the newest sites through https://

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The vibrant Central Provisions offers fresh, eclectic small plates, like fried cauliflower, local swordfish, and a foie gras parfait ($4-$26), while SurLie serves elegant tapas in a more reserved setting ($7-$16). At Emilitsa, try grilled eggplant and octopus and other rustic Greek fare ($8-$22), or step into the clean-lined Scandinavian-style décor at Portland Hunt + Alpine Club and feast on Swedish meatballs and gravlax, or share the smörgåsbord: chef’s choice of meats, fish, bread, and

aquadit ($5-$48). For more casual dining and a happy late-night bar scene, Taco Escobarr serves super-fresh tacos, burritos, and the Mexican pork and hominy stew pozole ($8-$14), along with its inventive margaritas including strawberry jalapeño or toasted coconut. Maiz, opened by an entrepreneurial young couple, spotlights Colombian street food and specializes in stuffed arepas: soft corn-based dough cooked on a grill, filled with meat, cheese, or vegetables, and topped with salsa Rosado, chimichurri, or garlic sauce ($6.50-$8.50). For fresh shellfish—from raw oysters to clam chowder and lobster stew—dip into the hip boathouse-styled Eventide Oyster Co. (market-based prices). And don’t miss the seafood and sake at Miyake, arguably the best Japanese restaurant in Maine; owner Masa Miyake (who also operates Pai Men Miyake) creates seasonal menus that incorporate vegetables, herbs, and meat from his own farm ($13-$19, or $60, for a four-course meal).

Local craft breweries abound. You can’t go wrong with any of them, but here are a few to note: Allagash, Bissell Bros, Foundation, Oxbow, and Rising Tide. Or, board the Maine Brew Bus, which offers a variety of tours in Portland and beyond, for a safe sampling expedition. For rotating craft beers on tap and other wintry concoctions—The Last Meow features catnip-infused gin ($14)—try Bramhall, a candlelit, cave-like hideaway with hearty comfort food, like frito pie, cheeseburgers, and shoestring fries ($8-$12).

For noshing and drinking elsewhere in the city, the chic, airy Drifters Wife (Munjoy Hill section) offers a small, seasonal menu of “new American” food, e.g. bluefish with charred onion and aioli and homemade focaccia ($7-$30), and excellent, all-natural wines. The Bao Bao Dumpling House, a West End standout, is a cozy spot for these homemade Chinese staples, along with dim sum and a gingery pork and noo-
CURIOSITIES: Bedding Down in Early America

A good night’s sleep was likely hard to come by in early American homes. Privacy was rare—any beds were located in common spaces—and only householders with seniority got one: children, servants, and guests were treated to pallets, or bare floors. Rope-strung supports tightened with a wooden peg (from which the phrase “sleep tight” derives) held mattresses stuffed with horsehair, straw, wool, and moss—or, at best, with goose feathers. Curtains mitigated cold winter drafts and helped shelter sleepers (or those engaged in other, personal nighttime activities). Beds and linens were labor-intensive to produce, or extremely expensive to buy. As “Bed Furnishings in Early America: An Intimate Look”—at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, in Hartford, Connecticut, further reveals: “Before the mid-twentieth century, a clean, comfortable bed was a luxury.”

Open through January 27, the show highlights textiles and furniture from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. An “English bed furnishing set” from 1650-1700, which was transported to America, features an enclosure made of fustian valances and curtains embroidered with crewel yarn in a flamboyant vine-and-flower pattern. A miniature, scaled version of a New England high-post bed (ca. 1750-1765) features historically accurate red-gingham bed furnishings (at left) made by Natalie Larson, an expert on historic textiles and reproductions based in Williamsburg, Virginia. Other exceptional handwork, which took artisans and homemakers countless hours to complete, is also on display in bed hangings and rugs, coverlets, and quilts.

All told, the exhibit concludes that despite the bed’s central role in reproduction, birthing, sickness, and death, holding apart “a space for comfort, warmth, and security” was largely a status symbol reflecting a homeowner’s financial standing and specific physical and emotional needs.

~N.P.B.
much” from destruction during the urban-renewal movement.

After World War II, when the Atlantic convoys and an AT&T node left, “the bottom fell out of Portland,” he says, and by the 1960s, “the entire Old Port area was abandoned to motorcycle gangs and a really rough crowd. This place could have been the setting for a good crime novel in the 1970s!” Businessman and landlord Frank Akers (a son of Frank G. Akers Sr., Harvard class of 1925) is credited with buying up the first derelict buildings and claiming that a law prevented “historic buildings from being torn down if they were occupied,” Robinson reports. “He ran newspaper ads in Boston promising ‘Artist Studios’ for $1 per month (no heat). He strung electric cords with light bulbs through the windows of the open buildings and prevented the buildings from being bulldozed.”

The city government did raze structures—including the old U.S. Post Office, constructed of “the finest Canadian marble,” Robinson adds, to build a parking lot in the heart of the city (now a pocket park). But preservation and redevelopment activism, combined with other factors—The Clean Water Act of 1972, which spurred anti-pollution measures in Casco Bay, and federal investments funneled into the city under then-U.S. senator George Mitchell, among others—helped keep Portland afloat.

Then, in the late 1990s, Maine Medical Center began expanding and MECA opened downtown. “Funky restaurants moved in to take advantage of the Fisherman’s Co-op. The bars in the Old Port cleaned up their acts,” he continues. “The city went from becoming a gutted New England port town to a vibrant center for creative-arts people, chefs, lawyers, and doctors. It is truly an astounding recovery.”

From left: The Francis, a mansion turned hotel; Maine Historical Society highlights craft breweries; skating on Thompson Point.

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