

At the centre of Portland's charming Old Port

BY ROCHELLE LASH, SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE SEPTEMBER 23, 2011



A suite at the Portland Harbor Hotel in Portland, Maine.

Photograph by: Portland Harbor Hotel, Portland Harbor Hotel

The Portland Harbor Hotel in Maine is setting the pace for a revitalization that is happening throughout the historic waterfront district of this charming town.

While the chic boutique hotel has undergone a sweeping renovation, the city's Old Port area also has experienced a vibrant gentrification. Locals and visitors enjoy a wonderfully walkable scene with historic architecture, sea cruises and terrific dining. Called "America's Foodiest Small Town" by Bon Appétit magazine, Portland will showcase its culinary talent at its annual Harvest on the Harbor Festival next month. And long before Portland became trendy, native son and literary lion Henry Wadsworth Longfellow liked the place, too. In his poem *My Lost Youth*, he wrote: "Often I think of the beautiful town ... that is seated by the sea."

"We feel we represent all of Portland," said Gerard Kiladjian, the general manager of the Portland Harbor Hotel, who spent the early part of his career in Montreal at the Four Seasons Hotel and Hotel Vogue.

"We want our guests to see everything and try everything in Portland. We have a Lincoln Town Car to take guests anywhere they want to go or they can simply step out the door and take a stroll. We are close to the Wadsworth-Longfellow House."

The hotel is a supremely comfortable stopover at the centre of the Old Port's charming red brick roads. Its deluxe, contemporary rooms and suites are elegantly decked out in pristine white and soft colours of the sea – azure, seafoam and aqua. Some of the best suites have dual-sided fireplaces, warming the living room and bedroom at the same time and also back-to-back flat-screen televisions, one for each space.

On the food front, Portland Harbor has accomplished what many hotels only dream of doing. Where many have restaurants that are formal and formulaic, Portland Harbor's dining room, Eve's at The Garden, is a hip, happening destination for power breakfasts and stylish lunches and dinners. Kiladjian and his team scored with good food and personable, professional service, but also intimate spaces and a generally hip take on things. The Eve's Kiss, a creamy chocolate liqueur martini, is the house cocktail, and among special dishes are modern renditions of Maine lobster risotto, pan-roasted salmon and cognac-braised lamb.

The hotel also will be strutting its stuff at the Harvest on the Harbor Festival. For the opening night Grand Tasting event, Eve's will serve its Crab Louis Tower with tomatoes and spicy caper tartar sauce.

The Harvest Fest will be held mostly in a cruise ship terminal in the Old Port, which adds waterfront magic. It will feature the "best-of" 75 chefs and 65 brewers and wineries at gourmet tastings like the Ultimate Seafood Splash, the Maine-Made Marketplace and the Lobster Chef of the Year competition. On the roster are such culinary luminaries with international reputations as Jonathan Cartwright of the White Barn Inn, a Relais and Châteaux in Kennebunkport, contrasting with local producers like the Shipyard Brewing Co. and Cold River Vodka.

Harvest on the Harbor is a big event for Portland, but almost any day can be an epicurean delight. The Portland Harbor Hotel offers a two-hour Maine Foodie Tour that features tastings of lobster, regional cheeses, Maine blueberry jam with scones, local micro-brews and artisan chocolates.

Another Portland culinary highlight is Walter's, a cool dining spot owned by Jeff Buerhaus, who favours what he calls new world cuisine, using the cooking styles and spices of Asia, the Mediterranean and the Caribbean.

His Harvest Festival offering still is under wraps, but at the restaurant, Jeff does casual lunch fare like fish tacos, Mussels Fra Diavolo, a down-home Maine lobster roll and special salads like the Far East Chop Chop, a toss-up of red curry chicken, chickpeas, crushed peanuts, sweet chili vinaigrette and Asian crisps. At night, Walter's goes gourmet with such dishes as sea scallops dipped in tamarind chutney, seared shrimp with green tea soba noodles, duck in soy sauce with water chestnuts, filet mignon with chimichurri or braised short ribs with jasmine rice.

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If You Go

Portland, Maine, is a five-hour drive from Montreal. Take Highway 10 east to Route 55 south. Cross into the U.S. at Stanstead, Que., and take U.S. Highways 91 and 93 south to Bethlehem, N.H., and Route 302 east.

Portland tourism: 207-772-4994, www.visitportland.com. Harvest on the Harbor Festival: Oct. 20-22, www.harvestontheharbor.com; 14 Ocean Gateway Pier. Events, \$45-75 U.S. p.p.; all-access pass to five events, \$285 p.p.

Portland Harbor Hotel: 888-798-9090, www.portlandharborhotel.com, 468 Fore St. Rooms and suites, \$269-\$399 U.S. per night, including use of Lincoln Town Car, evening turndown, concierge, bicycles with helmets, fitness room, guest computers, daily newspapers, baby gear. Rates decrease Nov. 1 to approximately \$169-299 U.S. Pet fee, \$25 per night; valet parking, \$16 per night. Packages are available with the Nine Stones Spa, the Maine Foodie Tour and Champagne evenings.

Walter's Restaurant: 207-871-9258, www.waltersportland.com; Two Portland Square. Lunch, Mon-Sat.; dinner, Mon-Sun.

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