

 SEND TO PRINTER | CLOSE WINDOW

# A Gourmet's Garden

Eve's at the Portland Harbor Hotel might be one of the city's best-kept dining secrets.

BY KATHLEEN FLEURY

The Portland Harbor Hotel, which has served as a buttress to the bustling Wharf Street for the past six years, feels like a serene sanctuary inside. Ascend its grand staircase to the lobby and to the adjacent cove of Eve's at the Garden. There it behooves you to have a seat in a comfy circular booth or tuck yourself away in the enclosed outdoor patio and appreciate Eve's for what it is: a typical hotel restaurant with atypically fine food.

Do not come to Eve's for the lively scene — go to Fore Street or Five Fifty-Five for that (if you can get a reservation). But do come to Eve's to eat good food, to be comfortable, and to enjoy some of its unique advantages. The garden, which grows many of the kitchen's herbs, offers something too scarce in Portland: comfortable, high-end, alfresco dining. It is open all summer and into the fall and hosts the popular Ice Bar, a winter weekend featuring ice sculptures and a martini luge. On many Friday and Saturday nights you can enjoy your meal accompanied by soothing jazz. For convenience, there's a parking garage below the hotel with an elevator that takes you directly to the restaurant entrance. And, if you happen to be a guest at the hotel, which will set you back anywhere from \$170 to more than \$350 depending on the season, take advantage of having some excellent food delivered (not a common occurrence in Maine) to the privacy of your own room.

All these perks add to the experience of eating at Eve's, but none outweighs the main draw: solidly good food. Chef Jeff Landry, who was the Maine Restaurant Association 2007 Chef of the Year (in part for his extraordinary work with local and national charity organizations) is a veteran of the Maine dining scene. He worked under Sam Hayward at the Harraseeket Inn and was the original executive chef at Cinque Terre. His own restaurant, Season's Café in Lewiston, was open for about three years, and he has ambitions to open another in the future. At Eve's, Landry has created a perfectly balanced, Mediterranean-influenced menu that changes with the seasons. Whether you're looking for a mid-afternoon salad or sandwich, a small, pre-dinner snack such as Kobe beef meatballs or herb roasted nuts, or a luxurious meal of lobster or steak, Eve's seems to have something for every appetite. If you come in a group, the options are even more versatile. Order a Mezza plate with hummus, tabbouleh, falafel, and eggplant baba ghanouj, or pick and choose from seven seafood options such as fried oysters or diver scallop ceviche. In short, your experience can range from twenty minutes with a cocktail at the bar by yourself to three hours of decadent feasting with friends.

Under Landry's guidance, Eve's has mastered basics, such as the addictively good braised short ribs, but not at the expense of innovation. "Whenever we are questioning ourselves, we go back to the basics, to the items I know we do really well and can hit every time," explains Landry. "We like playing with the comfort food and putting a little spin on it, kicking it up a notch . . . but you can still grab something like the lobster with saffron and Pernod." Landry also knows the value of using the best ingredients and is pushing the corporate owners of the hotel to use more local sources. "We're making strides by using natural meats, nitrate-free bacon, and supporting small farm programs whenever we can," the chef explains.

Eve's strives to excel in all areas of its food and beverage offerings. As proof, look to the bakery, which recently acquired Lisa Smith, a ten-year disciple of Standard Baking Company. Smith is implementing an entirely in-house artisanal baking program offering breads, pastries, and sweets with European, African, and Middle Eastern influences. "The volume is not so large that I can't take a lot of time," says Smith. "I can really labor over something and fuss over it. That's really exciting." Smith is sure to improve not only the bread and dessert offerings but also the breakfast selection, which already includes homemade corned beef hash and brioche French toast as well as the signature Benedicts — classic, crab, Tuscan, and Spanish.

Ultimately, Eve's first priority is serving its hotel guests — mainly corporate types, often in Portland on business, as well as other upscale travelers. But in its quest for accommodation, Eve's goes beyond being just a corporate hotel watering hole. It is a low profile, underutilized asset to the dining scene in Portland. "We're striving for that local support," admits Landry. Their efforts should not go unnoticed.

*Eve's at the Garden is located at the Portland Harbor Hotel, 468 Fore Street, in Portland. It is open seven days a week for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Handicap accessible. 207-775-9090. [www.portlandharborhotel.com](http://www.portlandharborhotel.com)*