

Menu for change on “the Hill”: *Young chefs add to rejuvenation of Munjoy Hill*

By **Bridget Huber** | June 22, 2006

PORTLAND – When David Iovino, chef and owner of The Blue Spoon decided to open a restaurant, he envisioned a cozy, relaxed spot with a neighborhood feel. He just wasn’t sure where to put it.

His search for the right neighborhood ranged from Yarmouth to Cape Elizabeth and ended just a few blocks from his home, when he found a vacant storefront atop Munjoy Hill in Portland’s East End.

Two and a half years later, The Blue Spoon is a fixture on what is known to locals simply as “the Hill.” Iovino and his staff, a tight-knit band of artists, musicians and writers, serve up generous portions of unfussy, Mediterranean-influenced food that’s caught the attention of foodies and critics across New England.



Chef Harding Lee Smith plates an entree at The Front Room.

Diane Hudson photo

Now, Iovino has company. In the last six months, two new eateries – The Front Room and Bar Lola – have opened, each within a block of The Blue Spoon. Like Iovino’s place, these restaurants are run by young chefs who live in the neighborhood and aim to create intimate gathering spots where good food is shared in a relaxed setting.

It’s hard to imagine that just a few years ago, the neighborhood was known not for its hip eateries, but for drugs, poverty and a crime rate sky-high by Maine standards.

When Portland’s shipping industry went into decline in the 1970s, the city fell on hard times. Munjoy Hill – home to Irish and Italian working-class families – wasn’t spared, said Christina Heller, secretary of The Munjoy Hill Neighborhood Organization and director of The League of Maine Neighborhoods.

Portland began to recover from the recession in the mid-1980s, but the revitalization that created the downtown Arts District and spruced up the Old Port has taken a while to reach Munjoy Hill. “You can’t revitalize a whole city at once,” Heller said.

New galleries and small businesses have popped up throughout the East End in the last several years, and many of the people who work and study downtown have moved to the Hill. Heller says that neighborhood pride is growing. Last week, a meeting of The Munjoy Hill Neighborhood Organization drew a record 70 members. “It was arguably the best neighborhood meeting I’ve been to in my life,” she said.

Beth Cassel-Tableman said she appreciates the sense of community on the Hill.

“This is like an old neighborhood,” she said, standing in her garden across from The St. Lawrence Arts & Community Center. “People stop and talk to one another. Plus, it’s beautiful!”

Congress Street meets the Eastern Promenade a few blocks from Cassel-Tableman’s home, offering sprawling views of Casco Bay. A grassy slope leads to a boat launch, a public beach and a footpath that runs to the Old Port and Back Bay.

But while many residents of the Hill say they’re glad to see cleaner streets, an influx of people who value community, and more local businesses, some worry that the Hill will lose its character as luxury condos are developed and house prices rise. Renters, especially, worry that someday they won’t be able to afford to live in their beloved neighborhood.

Stella and Guy Hernandez, owners of the newly opened Bar Lola, said they recognize this reality. The couple just finished renovating an 1850s-era house in the neighborhood. When the space most recently occupied by 100 Congress Street restaurant became available, they acted. “We wanted to do it before we could no longer afford to,” Stella Hernandez said.

Local diners may recognize the Hernadezes, their two chef/partners Josh Potocki and Christian Kryger, and some of their staff from One Fifty-Ate, the South Portland bakery and cafe known for its artisan food, especially their unique flattish, not-quite-round bagels.

Potocki and Guy Hernandez launched dinner at One-fifty Eight with a menu of small portions of carefully crafted food that allowed diners to try a range of dishes in one meal. They’ve brought the concept with them to Bar Lola, where offerings include grilled squid with lemon and oregano, bistecca with chard and morel butter and a salad of Maine beets with warm chevre and candied walnuts.

“It’s basically an optional five-course meal,” Potocki said. Usually, the chef chooses the dishes that comprise a five-course meal. But at Bar Lola, diners put together their own meal from a menu divided into salads, small, medium, large and sweet plates. Diners who want a lighter meal may opt for just a plate or two or come in for dessert or a drink.

The menu centers around food from local farms, and changes little by little, depending on what’s in season. Family recipes also make frequent appearances, said Hernandez, whose mother was at work in the kitchen shelling favas for one night’s meal.

When two parties seated at separate tables struck up a conversation and ended up sharing their meals last week, Hernandez was delighted. For her, that’s what it’s all about. “Food is personal. It’s something you share with one another,” she said.

Harding Lee Smith, chef/owner of the The Front Room agrees. His restaurant has a larger bar and more seats than the other two and serves what he calls “New American comfort food,” like meatloaf, pork chops and ribs. It has become a gathering point for many like Matt Tasker and Carrie Grant. “It’s affordable and fun,” Tasker said, “so that helps it become a habit.”

Smith said many of his customers are young professionals like Tasker and Grant who enjoy good food and like a low-key bar environment where the television is always on and tuned to the Red Sox whenever there’s a game. The Front Room also draws visitors from out of town, who want to experience a city neighborhood without traffic and parking hassles.

The Front Room’s open kitchen lets Lee interact with his neighbors as he works. He calls the neighborhood the friendliest, warmest one in town. He also thinks that the Hill’s three restaurants are different enough that they are complementary, not competitive.

Iovino agrees. He said The Blue Spoon continues to grow as more people realize that they don’t have to leave the neighborhood for a good meal.

A recent night’s menu included pan-roasted Atlantic salmon, fried oysters and Sicilian fish stew. The small ocher dining room glowed in the late afternoon sun as a few early diners sat beside picture windows. Waitresses with great haircuts and vintage aprons stood behind the bar.

“Portland used to kind of stop at the foot of Munjoy Hill,” Iovino said.

But not anymore.

FYI: Bar Lola is at 100 Congress St. and serves dinner Wednesday-Saturday. The Blue Spoon at 89 Congress St. serves lunch and dinner Tuesday-Saturday and Sunday brunch. The Front Room at 73 Congress St. serves brunch and dinner Wednesday-Sunday. The bar is open until 11.