

# inside *Maine*

MAINE MADE

## HANGING AROUND

Not every family is lucky enough to have a great aunt to knit them stockings to hang by the chimney with care. And the stockings at Wal-Mart just don't have the same warm, fuzzy, holiday charm as a big, wool, hand-woven sock. **Christmas Cove Designs** (800-737-2128; [www.christmascovedesigns.com](http://www.christmascovedesigns.com)), a knitwear company in Richmond, has been playing the role of great aunt since it was founded in the early '80s,



COURTESY CHRISTMAS COVE DESIGNS

sending heirloom-quality stockings handmade from virgin wool to homes across the globe. The stockings (\$36) come in dozens of styles, adorned with Christmas themes, Maine designs (lobster and moose and lighthouses), and more personalized motifs like golfers and skiers and fishermen. You'll even find smaller ones for Fido and Fifi. The company also makes ingenious hardwood and brass sock hooks (\$9-\$15) that let you hang your stockings without marring the face of your mantel.



## King of the Hill

Chef Harding Smith takes comfort food to new heights at the Front Room in Portland.

If you have any doubts about the resurgence of Munjoy Hill, you should take your appetite, along with a few friends, and head up Congress Street — and not just on a weekend night, either. Along with Bar Lola and the Blue Spoon, another up-and-comer of recent vintage is chef Harding Smith's very casual, very accessible spot, the Front Room, which serves brunch and dinner seven days a week.

"I wanted to make it a neighborhood gathering spot, to have the homey feel like when you come into someone's living room," Smith says, and he has certainly succeeded. There's a full bar against one wall and another wall entirely of windows. Comfortable wooden Hancock chairs are set around tables not too tightly packed. The space, which is indeed one large, open-plan room at the front of a corner lot, doesn't feel either too small or too crowded, even when full. Perhaps this is because, most often, you're distracted by the action. There

DINING

is no wall separating the kitchen from the dining area, just the open countertop at which, during dinner especially, you can watch Smith throwing his plates together and catch glimpses of the rest of the crew at full steam as the meal progresses.

"I wanted," the chef remarks, "to do comfort food, approachable to everybody,



Casual comfort defines the Front Room, where Harding Smith (at left) and staff cater to the local crowd.

which is why there's meatloaf and pork chops, stick-to-your-ribs cooking that might bring back good memories." In this, he has likewise succeeded, with a short menu of generously portioned salads, appetizers, sandwiches, and "main plates," the most exotic dishes one might run into the pink trout and monkfish on the specials board. "I'm trying to give big flavors, bold flavors," he explains. "Many of our customers are locals from Munjoy Hill, and if you're stopping in two or three times a week, you're not necessarily eating three courses. You may be getting an appetizer or one plate, so there's not time for subtle or complicated food."

This means very simple, honest, and satisfying combinations, like a warm goat cheese salad with diced beets and arugula in a muted vinaigrette or a slab of house pastrami-style salmon sauced with tangy mustard and sour cream, the smokiness of the fish nicely set off by the slightly sweet New England brown bread underneath it. You could easily make a meal of appetizers and salads alone, with choices like two crabcakes with so little filler — and so much meat — that they crumble on the plate and a crispy duck leg worthy of a bistro in southwest France, both with their greens. A bacon and egg salad includes a generous mound of frisée lettuce garnished with a poached egg whose yolk oozes over plentiful cubes of bacon and crunchy croutons. It does, indeed, bring to mind breakfast.

Among the main dishes, too, there's not a fusion mahimahi ravioli or a kiwi-sesame-cilantro foam in sight. The pork chop is oven-roasted, the scallops seared, the meatloaf grilled, the half-chicken baked, and the short ribs braised to melting perfection. With sides of creamed corn, pan-fried gnocchi, parmesan risotto, potatoes mashed with horseradish or gratinéed with cheddar cheese, it's clear that this chef has no fear of starches. He may have spent many happy hours in a steakhouse, judging by the appearance, too, of roasted red cab-

bage, sautéed spinach, skillet cornbread, and dressings and sauces with lashings of grainy mustard, blue cheese, and bacon fat.

To wash it all down, there is a full bar as well as a modest list of wines at very reasonable prices, almost all available by the glass and by the half-liter carafe, a welcome and rare innovation. "We don't have funky varietals," Smith says simply. "The goal was to have a lot of wines, by the glass, familiar varietals, wines we like and which are approachable." This last could be said of the desserts, too, old standbys like cheesecake and apple pie and fruit upside down cake, all ample and delicious if not wildly innovative.

While the hustle and bustle and the general noise level may put the Front Room out of the running as a place for an intimate evening at peak hours, that's not really the point of this corner bistro. "We let people have their fun, relax, and enjoy themselves," Smith explains. "They often linger long after their meal to hang out and watch the scene, have another glass of wine." It's true; you don't feel hurried or harried, the food is great, the ambiance lively, and the menu prices don't make you mentally

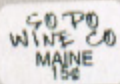


check your credit card balance. How often can you say that about any restaurant?  
MICHAEL SANDERS

The Front Room, located at 73 Congress St. in Portland, is open every day. Brunch is served 8 A.M. - 2:30 P.M., and dinner 5 - 10 P.M., 4 - 9 P.M. on Sundays. No reservations. 207-773-3366. [www.thefrontroomrestaurant.com](http://www.thefrontroomrestaurant.com)

### QUICK BITES

■ If you've never noticed the redemption sticker that appears on each bottle of wine sold in Maine, now's the time to start paying attention. SoPo Wine Co.'s seemingly hand-written stickers have become a reliable guide to interesting, often affordable wines from independent producers. Owners Doug Watts and Catherine Oster know the story behind every wine they stock; their motto is "we won't sell it if we won't drink it." And their taste seems to be right on: the South Portland distributor has added several employees in the year and a half since it was founded, and now supplies wine to markets



from Kittery to Bar Harbor, as well as to many of Maine's best restaurants.

■ Lupines, the restaurant at the Newcastle Inn in Newcastle, recently reopened under chef Dale Swartzentruber. Along with the new chef, who trained with Sam Hayward at Fore Street in Portland and then worked at Damariscotta River Grill, owners Peter and Laura Barclay have introduced an à la carte menu to go along with their five-course prix fixe menu. And they've done away with their single nightly seating; instead, Lupines (207-563-5685; [www.newcastleinn.com](http://www.newcastleinn.com)) now accepts reservations from 6 to 8 P.M. Tuesday through Saturday year-round.  
MICHAELA CAVALLARO