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**#20**

...gets you seven oysters (two grilled!) and one 8oz. kolsch at The Shop.

Enjoy your oyster outside on the deck at The Shop, an oasis on inner Washington Avenue.

# The *Thrifty* Gourmet

You don't have to be rich to dine like royalty here.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

IF YOU LOVE DINING OUT IN delicious Portland, it helps to have a few strategies for finding fine food without breaking the bank. For starters, you don't always have to go to the high-ticket, marquee spots in the Old Port. (Although we do recommend snagging a barstool at **Fore Street** the moment they open, for a drink and an appetizer or two at cocktail hour. No matter what you order, it's going to be terrific, and you can enjoy watching others spend a fortune.) Wonders await elsewhere. Remember, you're an epicure, not a snob. There are happy-hour specials all over town involving not just drink offers, but special bar menus, tapas, and appetizer discounts. It doesn't have to be a feast every night. The best surprises come when you sample and graze,

and Portland menus have elevated the "small plate" concept to an art form. Consider this radical-cheap manifesto:

### GO FOR THE HALF-SHELL

First, get into the epicure's mindset. For some of us, oysters and caviar are a great gateway to that one-percenter feeling.

"Just check off which kinds you want and how many," says Sam Molloy from behind the counter at **Island Creek Oysters** on Washington Avenue, handing over a paper checklist. Before him on a field of crushed ice sit clusters of oysters labeled with their provenances.

"They're all \$1.50 each," he says. "Even the wild, foraged Maine Belons from Damariscotta." We're in. We find that the Mook-



**#25**

...for beets, frites, boquerones, and a bloody at Central Provisions.

MEAGHAN MAURICE





**H5**

...gets you a glass of wine and a tapa.

A glass of wine comes with a free tapa (see above) for just \$5 on **Tapas Mondays** at Lolita. A recent “back to Spain night” selection includes, clockwise from left: Catalan black rice with aioli; albondigas; papas with mojo; wood-grilled pork steak; blistered shishitos; and Bangs Island Mussels in escabeche. Below, Stella Hernandez serves bar patrons at Lolita.

ie Blues from Bill Mook’s seafood farm in Damariscotta have classic oyster flavor: mildly saline, tender, and sweet. The wild Maine Belon is a huge, flat-shelled beast, and it turns out to be a tangy, meaty revelation.

Island Creek, a.k.a. **The Shop**, is a seafood tasting room with a nicely curated selection of local brews and wine to accompany. It’s also a seafood market, and this is its charm. The crushed-ice display, racks of retail items for sale, and stark, backless metal stools are in jaunty contrast to the oysters and caviar you can wash down here with such treats as a glass of Paul D. Grüner-Veltliner from Austria (\$7) or Bunker Brewing Salad Daze (\$8). The sound system is excellent, and there’s patio seating.

“We’ve got a Sunday caviar special,” says manager Kit Paschal. “Three five-gram bites of caviar for \$18. One bite is straight caviar on a Mother of Pearl spoon, one’s on an oyster, and one’s on a blini.”

### WISE UP ABOUT WINE

“Did you know it’s Wine Wednesday?” asks our waitress at **Little Giant**, one of the West End’s friendly cafes, as she deals out menus. “All the bottles with stars next to them are half price tonight.”

We select a bottle of Valtea Spanish Albarino—floral and mineral and summery—

to accompany a salad of Little Gem lettuce with buttermilk dressing and a shower of tiny parmesan croutons. *Porco à Alentejana* follows, a sophisticated riff on a traditional Portuguese stew of clams and pork. Impossibly tender cubes of braised pork shoulder, sweet and tender littleneck clams, and bits of fried potato are enrobed in a tomato sauce in a wide, shallow bowl. Grilled toasts accompany for chasing the juices.

The check for this fancy-peasant feast is \$61, including the \$44 bottle of Albarino, which tonight is ours for just \$22.

That’s not the only half-price-bottle night in town. **Local 188** has one on Mondays, at **C<sup>2</sup>** in the Westin Portland Harborview on High Street it’s Wednesdays, and

at cozy **Bonobo** on Pine Street, wine by the bottle is half price on Mondays with a pizza special thrown in.

### KEEP GOING

**O**n Munjoy Hill, **Lolita** turns Monday evenings into tasty surprises. “We have a lot of repeat Tapas Night customers,” says Stella Hernandez, co-owner with her chef husband Guy Hernandez. “It can be funny in the dead of winter when tapas-seekers come in from the cold the moment we open.”

Every Monday, Stella chooses a half a dozen wines to showcase a country or region, such as Spain or South America. These are offered at \$5 per glass, and that



## HUNGRY EYE

price includes a complimentary tapa created by Guy and his team to support the regional theme.

The fun part is that you pick the wine, but the tapa is a surprise. On a recent visit, France was the theme. I chose a crisp Charrisse Picpoul de Pinet from the Languedoc-Roussillon. After inquiring whether I had dietary restrictions (nope), the bartender delivered a baguette toast topped with local North Spore mushrooms sautéed in marrow butter. Divine!



“Tonight, keeping it French, we’ve also got a *brandade* fritter, vegetables and aioli, and a grilled chicken liver,” says Stella. Stick around, and you might try them all.

Across Congress Street, the **Blue Spoon** has weeknight Wine Time from 4:30 to 6 p.m., when a glass of red, white, or sparkling house wine or selected local beer is \$4. You can match this up with such tasty appetizers as Patatas Bravas (\$6) or Blue Cheese Toast with garlic spinach (\$8).

### NOW YOU’VE GOT THE HANG OF IT

In the Old Port, the **Corner Room** has a notoriously great complimentary spread of finger food on weekdays with \$3 house wine, beer, and prosecco.

At **Woodford Food & Beverage** on Forest Avenue, there’s a happy hour from 4 to 6 p.m. every day but Sunday with a daily selected \$3 draft and glass of wine for \$5.

“We make a special happy-hour cocktail every day, too, for \$6, and our oyster shooters are \$4,” says Birch Shambaugh, who owns the Woodford Corner hotspot with his wife Fayth Preyer. Oyster shooter? “We place one of whatever oyster we’re shucking that day in a small glass of our own horseradish-infused vodka, and top it with our Bloody Mary mix.” You know you want

FROM LEFT: MEAGHAN AMURICE; COURTESY PHOTO: JOAQUIN MALLMANN

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## HUNGRY EYE

one. “Oh it’s just about everyone’s favorite thing,” Shambaugh says.

Maybe it isn’t always about the food for you? If what you want is the vibe, you might head to the **Inkwell**, the **Press Hotel’s** bar on Exchange any Sunday through Thursday from 4 to 6. The marble bar, upholstered sofas, banquettes, and barstools, and the view of Exchange Street all whisper seductively of a luxury getaway. But the well drinks, local brews, and selected wines are just \$5 each.

## GO TO LUNCH

Treat yourself to the perfect little midday meal to experience fine dining on a thrifty budget.

**Central Provisions** serves brunch on Mondays too, which seems enlightened. On a recent Monday, I sat at the bar watching the kitchen team carefully compose lovely dishes while listening to the mellow, bluesy sound track.

“Our sourdough is from Standard Baking,” I’m told by a young fellow slicing a loaf. “The burger buns are made in house, and we make the gougères here.” He serves me the day’s special breakfast sandwich: a split gougère (savory, biscuit-sized cheese puff) topped with thin shavings of ham, a sunny-side up egg, and gruyère-spiked mornay sauce, with a tangle of peppery arugula leaves on top.

It’s a \$12 thrill. And since it’s Monday brunch, you might include a mimosa or bloody Mary to go with it for \$7.

## HEADED EAST

The city’s fantastic Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean restaurants offer more affordable incentives. **Sichuan Kitchen** on Congress Street has two-course lunches for \$10; neighbor **Mi Sen** has them for \$12. Hot noodle bowls and pho at **Cong Tu Bot** on Washington Avenue are a famously great value at \$12 to \$14. In the heart of the Arts district, enjoy a plate of four hot, crisp lobster rangoons at **Empire** for only \$8.

**Bao Bao**, the dumpling destination on Spring Street, cleverly schedules happy hour between 2 and 4 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays, with all dumplings half price. Two of you might share an order of pork and scallion dumplings and a large carafe of sake for a grand total of less than \$10. ■





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CHANTERELLE AND PEA CONSERVA

INGREDIENTS: 1 lb. chanterelle mushrooms, 1/2 lb. peas, 1/2 cup olive oil, 1/2 cup balsamic vinegar, 1/2 cup honey, 1/2 cup salt, 1/2 cup pepper, 1/2 cup garlic powder, 1/2 cup onion powder, 1/2 cup paprika, 1/2 cup cumin, 1/2 cup coriander, 1/2 cup fennel, 1/2 cup cardamom, 1/2 cup nutmeg, 1/2 cup mace, 1/2 cup allspice, 1/2 cup cloves, 1/2 cup cinnamon, 1/2 cup ginger, 1/2 cup turmeric, 1/2 cup saffron, 1/2 cup annatto, 1/2 cup annatto powder, 1/2 cup annatto paste, 1/2 cup annatto oil, 1/2 cup annatto butter, 1/2 cup annatto cream, 1/2 cup annatto cheese, 1/2 cup annatto sauce, 1/2 cup annatto dressing, 1/2 cup annatto marinade, 1/2 cup annatto rub, 1/2 cup annatto glaze, 1/2 cup annatto powder, 1/2 cup annatto oil, 1/2 cup annatto butter, 1/2 cup annatto cream, 1/2 cup annatto cheese, 1/2 cup annatto sauce, 1/2 cup annatto dressing, 1/2 cup annatto marinade, 1/2 cup annatto rub, 1/2 cup annatto glaze.