

# Old Port

PORTLAND'S CITY MAGAZINE

The  
Neighborhood  
Issue

\$5.95US

04>



0 74470 29203 6

# Old Port

PORTLAND'S CITY MAGAZINE

[oldportmag.com](http://oldportmag.com)

If whole or part of this article is reproduced online, we ask that a link back to [oldportmag.com](http://oldportmag.com) be placed. Thank you.

# Dine

WHERE TO EAT NOW

BY SUSAN AXELROD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY TED AXELROD



# BLUE FIN

SEAFOOD HAS THE STARRING ROLE AT THE PORTLAND HARBOR HOTEL'S INTIMATE, RELAXED RESTAURANT.

The Portland Harbor Hotel's annual Ice Bar is one of the most popular winter events in the city, drawing sell-out crowds and raising money for local charities. Year-round, the hotel offers an equally noteworthy venue for dining, drinking, and making merry—minus the DJ and ice luges—at its restaurant, Blue Fin North Atlantic Seafood. Last fall, the intimate dining room and bar were rebranded to coincide with a significant redecoration of the hotel's rooms and public spaces. Those who remember the restaurant as Eve's at the Garden will notice that while the furniture has been reupholstered to match the rest of the hotel's chic yet relaxed, nautical-inspired look, the cozy, warm feel of the space remains the same. A double-sided gas fireplace serves as a divider between the dining

room and lounge, and a wall of windows looks out to the central courtyard, which is filled with greenery in the summer, and where a large fire pit blazes on chilly evenings.

The most significant change is on the menu, which is now focused on fish and seafood. "We say North Atlantic because that offers us a very wide range," says executive chef Tim Labonte, adding that much of what he procures is local. All of Blue Fin's lobster, for example, comes from Potts Harbor Lobster in Harpswell; other sources include Portland's Harbor Fish Market and Browne Trading Co. Labonte, who has been in the Portland Harbor Hotel's top culinary position for six years, says it was "an easy decision" to rebrand the restaurant as seafood-centric. "We're a block from the Portland

waterfront, and it's what our hotel guests expect," he says.

Those looking for a lobster roll will find Labonte's signature lobster popover, available at lunch and dinner. The airy, slightly warm popover, seasoned with fresh chervil, is generously filled with large pieces of perfectly cooked lobster meat lightly dressed with lemon-thyme crème fraîche, for a delicious and memorable riff on the classic sandwich. Also on the lunch menu: the fresh catch taco—meaty swordfish on my visit—with crunchy coconut slaw and curry glaze; and Labonte's take on fish and chips, beer-battered cod with baked potato fries. I'm usually a skinny-fries fan, but these wedges of baked potato, soaked in paprika-seasoned buttermilk, coated in rice flour and



**Opposite page:** Blue Fin's rendition of fish and chips: beer-battered cod and baked potato fries with malt-vinegar slaw. **This page:** Chef Tim Labonte's signature lobster popover is served with homemade salt and vinegar chips.



**This page, clockwise from top:** Dining room supervisor Erdem Ankarali mixes a Champagne Cosmo. Seared sea scallops with leek and pistachio pesto on wild rice with cauliflower puree. Swordfish tacos with curry glaze and coconut slaw. **Opposite page, from top:** Executive chef Tim Labonte. Brandade, a savory spread of salt cod, potatoes, and olive oil, with a Negroni.

**“WE’RE NOT  
JUST A  
PLACE FOR  
SPECIAL  
OCCASIONS.”**

**—TIM LABONTE**



fried, are crispy outside, creamy inside, and win me over. Labonte also serves them with the steaks on the dinner menu.

Blue Fin’s bar boasts comfy, high-backed stools and an intriguing “bar bites” menu to nibble with drinks, such as the Champagne Cosmo—vodka, cranberry juice, Cointreau, and lime juice topped with bubbly. Grill and Chill Shrimp features plump, garlic-oil-glazed shrimp with basil yogurt and tomatoes—both the presentation and the flavors are bright and fresh. Savory, warm brandade, a Provençal dish of salt cod and potato whipped with olive oil, is rich and luscious spread on crostini. I could happily spend an evening at the bar with a glass of wine, the brandade, and perhaps one of Labonte’s creative salads—a practice the chef encourages. “We’re not just a place for special occasions,” he says. “We want people to know they can come in for a dozen oysters and a beer, or choose a few appetizers or bar bites and a specialty cocktail.”

A 1999 graduate of the College of Culinary Arts at Johnson and Wales University, Labonte worked for many years at resorts in Key West before returning to Maine. His large plates, which are both imaginative and restrained, offer evidence of that training and experience. Seared sea scallops topped with grilled leek and pistachio

pesto are nestled on a bed of wild rice and pureed cauliflower, a creamy, earthy match for my favorite Maine seafood. Slabs of ginger-basil glazed grilled yellowfin tuna loin, left rare in the center, are presented on top of a crispy udon noodle cake with baby bok choy and perfectly round pools of peanut sauce decorating the plate, for an exciting combination of flavors and textures. Desserts, too, are special without going over the top. Lightly spiced and airy pumpkin panna cotta is playfully served with toasted waffle triangles, and a slab of chocolate-hazelnut pâté is appropriately rich without being tooth-achingly sweet.

With fewer than 40 seats, including a trio of especially cozy, semicircular booths along one wall, Blue Fin’s vibe is at once sophisticated and comfortable. Guests can also dine in a section of the lobby called the “crow’s nest,” which offers a birds-eye view of the bustling Old Port, in the 20-seat bar and lounge, or in the summertime, out in the pretty, secluded courtyard. I’m willing to bet that by the time it’s in bloom again, Blue Fin will no longer feel like Portland’s best-kept secret.

**Blue Fin**  
**Portland Harbor Hotel**  
**468 Fore St. | Portland**  
**207.775-9090**  
[portlandharborhotel.com/portland-harbor-hotel-dining](http://portlandharborhotel.com/portland-harbor-hotel-dining) ★