

OFF DUTY

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



The Rule Of Claw

On a driving-and-dining trip in coastal Maine, a seafood lover reels in lobster rolls and (surprisingly) so much more

BY POLYA LESOVA

I woke up hungry. Fortunately, I was in a town that can satiate a big appetite. My husband, Paul, and I had flown to Portland, Maine from New York late the previous night for a five-day road trip up the coast. We went to savor the state's spring beauty, hike along some sea-side trails, dip our toes in the still-icy Atlantic. But mostly we went to eat. I had lobster rolls—that quintessential summer food—on the brain and after a long, tediously frigid winter, I was only too ready to usher in the season. But the rolls would have to wait. That first morning we took a walk around downtown Portland and stumbled onto the Holy Donut.

A small shop in the salt-sprayed Old Port area, the Holy Donut displayed a giant blackboard proclaiming that all the establishment's doughnuts are made with mashed Maine potatoes; as it turns out, this results in a moister texture than flour alone. Calorie counters might balk at spud doughnuts—but not us. We gazed lovingly at the display case loaded with col-

orate food. It was too early for the hard stuff, so we asked him to whip us up a blackberry coconut fruit fizz, a mix of blackberry purée, coconut cream and honey vanilla syrup. It tasted like a summer pool party: sunny and refreshing.

While our itinerary allowed room for such serendipitous discoveries, I had armed myself with a list of recommended places to eat from Erin French, the chef at the Lost Kitchen, a restaurant in her hometown of Freedom, Maine (population: 719). Located in an 1834 gristmill, it exudes rustic charm, with an open kitchen and wooden tables, ceilings and walls. Ms. French, author of a new Maine-inspired cookbook ("The Lost

Kitchen: Recipes and a Good Life Found in Freedom, Maine"), is an enthusiastic culinary ambassador for her state. She describes her cooking as "modern farmhouse," and uses local ingredients such as asparagus, peas and rhubarb in the spring, and heirloom tomatoes and fresh berries in the summer.

"One of my favorite ingredients to cook with are spring dug parsnips," she said. "They are sweet and creamy after staying in the ground through the winter and letting their sugars concentrate."



MAINE SQUEEZE Top: The state staple, served at the Lobster Shack at Two Lights. Left: a Black Heart berry mocktail at Vena's.

arrived steaming hot; we loaded them with strawberry jam and butter and discussed our lunch plans.

A couple of days later, on my birthday, we made our way south to the coastal town of Camden, where we hiked to the top of Mount Battie for a view of the

orful specimens, slathered with strawberry or pomegranate or blueberry icing. The maple variety came sprinkled with bits of bacon. We chose a single dark-chocolate, sea-salt doughnut each and, congratulating ourselves on rare self-restraint, moved on.

A few blocks away, husband-and-wife Steve and Johanna Corman run Vena's Fizz House, a combination mixology-equipment store and bar that serves cocktails and mocktails featuring bitters, tonics, spirits, syrups and "shrubs." It was just past 11 a.m. and Mr. Corman was already tending the bar. As we settled in, he eagerly told us how shrubs (drinking vinegars that date back to colonial times) and bitters enhance beverages much the way spices can

People think Maine has little to offer besides lobster, she added, "but there is so much more happening foodwise." Maine's growing season is longer than you might think since local farmers have figured out ways to farm year-round by using greenhouses.

At the top of Ms. French's list of must-visit restaurants was Eventide Oyster Co. in Portland. We grabbed two seats at one end of the concrete bar; an imposing block of granite loaded with oysters on ice occupied the other. The lobster roll, served on steamed bun, diverted us deliciously, but the real stars that day were oysters served on the half shell, accompanied by kimchi, horseradish and Tabasco ices. We tried a half dozen, including the

ROLL WITH IT From top: Young's Lobster Pound overlooks an estuary on Penobscot Bay; descending Mount Battie near Camden. Inset left: A Holy Donut dozen, made from potatoes.

Basket Island and Glidden Point varieties and could have happily whiled away the afternoon at that sunny counter, sipping white wine and slurping up more oysters, but Bar Harbor waited.

A couple of hours into the four-hour ride, I already had dinner on my mind. "Dock-and-dine shore diners will never go out of style," Ms. French had said in an email in reference to Young's Lobster Pound in Belfast, about halfway to Bar Harbor. Delightfully old school, Young's has picnic tables outside overlooking an estuary on Penobscot Bay. We ordered two lobsters, coleslaw and potato salad—and cheerfully made a mess out of prying every morsel out of the shells.

We motored on to Bar Harbor and over the next couple of days we burned off a few of the lobster calories by hiking in Acadia National Park. On an overcast day, we walked the popular Ocean Path, enjoying expansive views of the rugged coastline, the spruce forests and the ocean waves breaking against the rocks. We passed Thunder Hole, a narrow cave where you can hear the ocean roar, and drove to the top of Cadillac Mountain for panoramic views of Frenchman Bay



and the Porcupine Islands.

At Beal's Lobster Pier in Southwest Harbor, which we found on Yelp, we ordered two large lobsters for lunch one day—they weighed almost 5 pounds together. "We never get the big ones. Let's do it," Paul said. We sat down at a picnic table and took in the views. Our lunch came on a blue plastic tray loaded with the two crustaceans, two ears of corn, two containers of coleslaw, butter and biscuits on paper plates. This monumental meal could only be followed by a nap. We were so full we skipped dinner, if you don't count a large portion of ice cream we shared from CJ's Big Dipper in Bar Harbor.

The next morning, appetite fully regained, we zipped over to Jordan Pond House, a high-ceilinged tea-house located inside the park, for popovers. "It is a tourist attraction but a bit timeless," Ms. French said. Our popovers—little clouds of joy—

hundreds of islands in Penobscot Bay, a vista which famously inspired Edna St. Vincent Millay's poem, "Renascence." Nearly as inspirational: Lunch at Long Grain in Camden, which Ms. French had claimed served the "best Thai street food under the sun." This small restaurant, with its handful of tables, makes its own noodles and uses seasonal, local ingredients. A standout: the Pad See Ew, a dish of stir-fried broad noodles, kale, fried egg and tofu.

After a sunset sail in Penobscot Bay aboard the Schooner Surprise, a 1918 yacht, we headed to Suzuki's Sushi Bar in Rockland. The nigiri and maki were notably simple, with nothing to undermine the freshness of the fish. Chef Keiko Suzuki Steinberger, who moved to the U.S. from Japan, told us that she buys seafood from Jesse's Market in Rockland and from individual fishermen. She's especially pleased with the local tuna, particularly its belly, known as toro. "That is a super delicacy in Japan," she said.

On our last afternoon in Maine, we had one more lobster roll at the Lobster Shack at Two Lights in Cape Elizabeth. We sat outside at a red picnic table and gazed at Maine's rocky coastline, and realized that if we left right away, we'd still have time to hit Mount Desert Island Ice Cream in Portland before our flight.

► For where to stay and eat in coastal Maine, see wsj.com/travel



ICE TO MEET YOU Long Reach oysters and a lobster roll at Eventide.