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

BY POLYA LESOWA

I woke up hungry. Fortunately, I was in a town that can satisfy a big appetite. My husband, Paul, and I had flown to Portland, Maine, from New York the previous night for a five-day road trip up the coast. We went to savor the state’s spring beauty, hike along some seaside trails, dip our toes in the still-cold Atlantic. But mostly we went to eat. I had lobster rolls—that quintessential summer food—on the beaches and after a long, tedium-frightened 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 moistier texture than flour alone. Colorful counters might hail at sweet doughnuts—but not us. We gazed lovingly at the display case loaded with calorie-laden food. It was too early for the hard stuff, so we asked him to whip up a blackberry coconut fruit fizzle, a mix of blackberry puree, 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 Eric French, the chef at the Lost Kitchen, a restaurant in her hometown of Freedom, Maine (population: 759). Located in an 1834 gristmill, it exudes rustic charm, with an open kitchen and wooden tables, ceilings and walls. Mr. 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 shakers in the spring, and heirloom tomatoes and fresh berries in the summer.

“Of my favorite ingredients to cook with are spring dog purses,” she said. “They are sweet and creamy after staying in the ground through the winter and letting their sugars concentrate.”

On our drive, we passed the Lobster Shack at Two Lights, left a Blackberry pie on the table. 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
People think Maine has little to offer besides lobster; she added, “but there is so much more happening here.” 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 Rumble 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, and occupied the other. The lobster roll, served on steamed bun, proved a delicious appetizer, but the real stars that day were oysters served on the half shell, accompanied by kimchi, horseradish, and Tabasco sauce. We tried a half dozen, including the

ROLL WITH IT! Young’s Leebster Pound overlooks an estuary on Pemaquid Point. A scenic drive north of Camden, inset left: A Holy Donut, done, made from potatoes.

Basket Island and Glimmer Point varieties and could have happily relished 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. “Steak and three shore dinners will never go out of style,” Mrs. French had said in an email in reference to Young’s Lobster Pound in Bar Harbor, about halfway to Bar Harbor. Delightfully old school, Young’s has picnic tables outside overlooking an estuary on Penobscot Bay. We ordered two lobster rolls, coleslaw and potato salad—and cheerfully made a mess out of piping 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 Perquimans Islands.

At Seal’s Lobster Pier in Southwest Harbor, which we found on Yelp, we ordered two large lobsters for lunch one day—they weighed almost 8 pounds together. “We never get the big ones. Life’s too short,” 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, lettuce, and 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 GP’s Big Dipper in Bar Harbor.

The next morning, appetite fully regained, we zipped over to Jordan Pond House, a high-elevated teashop located inside the park, for popovers. “It’s 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: Tamarack at Long Grain in Camden, which Mrs. 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 raft ride in Penobscot Bay aboard the Schooner Surprise, a 1918 yacht, we headed to Sunnyside’s Sails Bar in Rockland. The nautical and maritime were notably simple, with nothing to undermine the freshness of the fish. Chef Kelly Sanfilippo Rosalberger, 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 for ice cream in Portland before our flight.

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