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Maine home to more than lobster

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A few years ago, I introduced Daily News Journal readers to some of the wonders of Maine. It is a state that celebrates the things we all seek, especially when on vacation. There are amazing wilderness areas, wonderful historical sights, great spots for simply relaxing, and hardy, helpful people.

But food in Maine has its own particular magic. Some of the restaurants in Maine are truly remarkable — literally gathering ingredients fresh daily, cooking only what is best, seasonal and delicious.

From the famous lobster shacks to fine and fancy restaurants, chefs and cooks celebrate local ingredients with abandon. At either end of the scale are people who work hard to get the best local ingredients and use them wisely to create truly spectacular meals. While concepts such as "terroir" — enjoying food from a specific region or grower — as well as slow food and "field-to-table cooking" are just cropping up across the rest of the country, these things seem to come naturally to great chefs and cooks in Maine.

Fresh, creamy lobster rolls and hot bowls of buttery corn chowder are obviously quintessential Maine foods. And there is still nowhere better to try these than at Cindy's in Freeport. There, owner Bob Pottle rises early every morning (except Saturdays, when church is the priority) to prepare his famous chowders and check in with local fishermen to gather the best seafood for the day. He serves up fried whole clams shucked to order, lobster rolls bursting with fresh, sweet meat and the best chowders in Maine. A sunny lunch at Cindy's roadside tables can't be beat — except by dinner at one of the best restaurants in the United States (and possibly the world), Cinque Terre in Portland.

Just by luck that now seems providential, I wandered down a brick alley in Portland's Old Port neighborhood and found Cinque Terre. This, it turned out, was somewhat miraculous as Cinque Terre is an astonishing and wonderful place to dine — with wait lists most evenings. There's a welcoming courtyard filled with umbrella-topped tables as you enter — a perfect spot for al fresco dining. Inside, the converted ship's chandlery makes for a dramatic two-story dining space lined with worn brick, copper accents and an open kitchen.

Here, local ingredients are transformed under the watchful eye of Chef Lee Skawinski into spectacular dishes. Fine hospitality and thought are reflected in every aspect of the food and service — from our server's extensive hospitality background to the produce grown just for their menu at Grand View farm in Greene, Maine.

Our waiter had a nutrition degree from the University of Maine and spent time working in Austria before settling into his job at Cinque Terre. His knowledge and enthusiasm for his job was our first clue that things here are different. And are they ever different: this is a new breed of restaurant, one born of meticulous care and the love of excellent food, service and wine.

Dan Kary and his wife, Michelle, own Cinque Terre and its new sister, Vignola Restaurant. Together with executive chef Lee Skawinski, they have put their hearts into every aspect of the operations — from the ground up. Dan's brother Mark runs the Grand View Farm operation, which supplies much of the produce for both restaurants. The rest of the menu is filled with local ingredients, from organically grown coffee roasted down the street to lamb raised upstate.

This attention to detail creates magnificent menus filled with fresh flavors and memorable dishes. Our tasting menu started with a juicy heirloom tomato stuffed with vegetables and toasted pine nuts, drizzled with fresh oregano pesto — a celebration of summer on a plate. Next came comfort in a bowl — an earthy, richly seasoned mushroom risotto replete with salty pancetta bits. Then, fresh halibut was wrapped in Swiss chard roasted almost crisp, leaving the fish moist and mild. Next came pan-seared veal tenderloin paired with gorgonzola and a garlicky white bean paste bursting with flavor. Following this came the best surprise of the evening — a cheese course featuring aged teleme cheese from Sunset Acres farm paired with a fig cake and spiced nuts. Frankly, the whole meal was like a fantasy — one perfect plate after another, each with its own inventive take on freshness and texture.

So, next time you're thinking of a gourmet's vacation, think closer to home than Europe; Maine is closer and offers much. And if you just can't get away, Chef Skawinski from Cinque Terre suggests gathering your own fresh ingredients for a meal you can cook at home.

BAKED HALIBUT FILLET WITH BASIL CRUST AND TOMATO FONDUTA

6 oz. halibut fillet
1 egg
Bread crumbs
Small bunch of basil
Lemon zest
4 heirloom tomatoes
1 onion
2 garlic cloves
1 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper, to taste

Roughly chop onion and peel 2 cloves of garlic. Cut 4 tomatoes in 1/8 sections.

Put all ingredients into small (one-quart) pot and simmer for 20 minutes.

Add all products to blender, season with salt and pepper to taste, and blend on high for one minute, until well-blended.

Preheat oven to 375°F. Chop basil, zest 1/2 lemon into bread crumbs, and set aside.

Spread 1 tablespoon of bread crumb mix on baking sheet.

Whisk the egg and dip one side of the halibut into it.

Next, dip the egg-washed halibut into the basil bread crumbs and place on the oiled baking sheet. Place in oven for 8 to 10 minutes or till white and firm.

Place fonduta on plate using a 2-ounce ladle, and place halibut fillet on top of sauce. Squeeze a little lemon on to fish and serve.

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