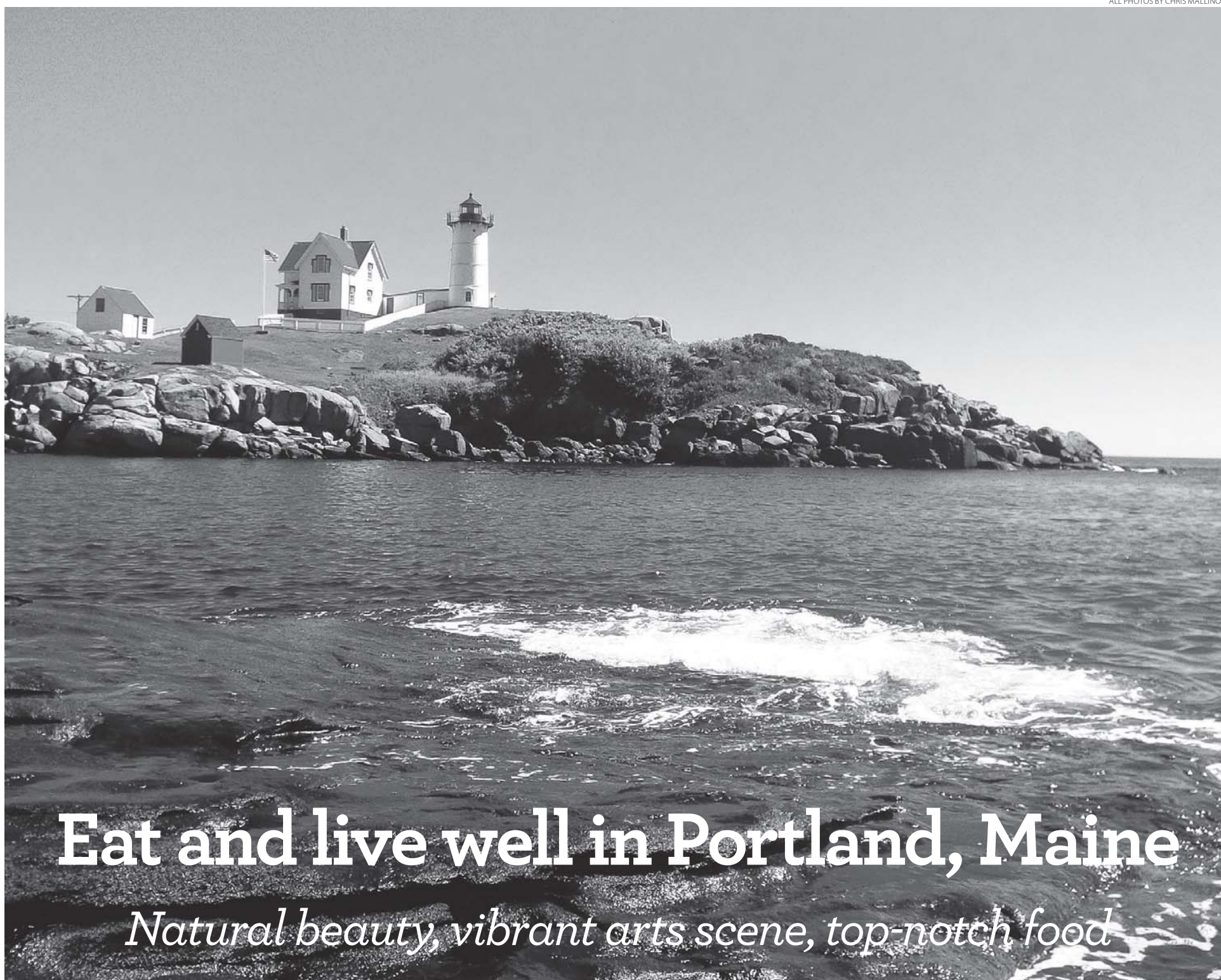


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Eat and live well in Portland, Maine

Natural beauty, vibrant arts scene, top-notch food

The Cape Neddick Lighthouse near Ogunquit—one of the most photographed lighthouses in the United States.

By Chris Mallinos

The live band breaks into a Tom Petty cover just as the buzzer I'm holding begins to vibrate, alerting me that my dinner is ready. I barely notice it over the excited bustle of the restaurant's evening crowd—kids dancing to the music, couples stopping in for a bite to eat before a night on the town.

Luckily, the buzzer is in the shape of a giant red lobster, so it's hard to miss.

I weave through the crowd to retrieve my food from the pick-up window. It's even better than I imagine. The freshness of my pound-and-a-half lobster—caught that morning off of Maine's revered coast—is perfection on a plate.

But there's something else at play here, something quite wonderful. Maybe it's the unmistakable ocean breeze that embraces the waterfront patio where I'm seated. Maybe it's the music. Maybe it's the ease with which perfect strangers strike up conversation over dinner.

Locals like to brag that Portland has more restaurants per capita than any other city in the U.S.

Or maybe it's Portland.

A pleasant surprise

With a population of just 66,000, it's easy for Portland, Maine, to be overshadowed. Admittedly, I didn't know much about the city when my wife and I decided to visit with our 11-week-old son. When we first googled it, most of our hits were for the other Portland, in Oregon.

But Maine's Portland is no afterthought. Its natural beauty, vibrant arts community, and food scene—oh, the food—can compete with any city in the United States.

Locals like to brag that Portland has more restaurants per capita than any other city in the U.S., behind only San Francisco—even if they aren't so sure it's true. True or not, the selection is bountiful and diverse, especially in the city's Old Port district. The proximity to the ocean and to the farmland means that local restaurants have no shortage of fresh ingredients to work with.

That connection to nature creates an unpretentious pride among local chefs, as if they know they're offering a bit of Maine on every plate. The owner of the city's famed Gorgeous Gelato, recent Milan import Donato Giovine, likes to claim that his homemade gelato is "life changing." It's only a slight exaggeration. If you have a sweet tooth, the Standard Baking Company on the city's waterfront is a local institution.

But of course, seafood is king here, and the Portland Lobster Company—where I enjoyed my own lobster feast—was recently voted the city's best by a local newspaper.

Portlanders are among the warmest people you'll meet.

Exploring the city

Portlanders are among the warmest people you'll meet and genuinely want you to enjoy their city as much as they do. And enjoy it, they do.

Explore the city's very walkable downtown on any given weekend and you can hear live bands playing any number of venues almost constantly.

And on the first Friday evening of every month, the thriving arts scene pours onto the streets to feature local artists in Portland's First Friday Art Walk.

There's no better place to stay in the city than the Westin Portland Harborview. Originally opened as the Eastland Hotel in 1927, this landmark spot has hosted everyone from Charles Lindbergh, to four U.S. presidents, to Ozzy Osbourne. (Ozzy's stay was short-lived after someone infamously threw a piece of patio furniture off the rooftop pool area to the street below during one of his parties.)

Today, the rooftop pool is gone, but the hotel's 15th floor lounge offers stunning views of the city.

Family memories

Of course, you can't visit Maine without exploring its coast, so after a few days in Portland we headed an hour south to the town of Ogunquit, in York County. As soon as we arrive, I get the sense that it's the kind of place people visit over and over again. The kind of place where family memories are made.

With quaint cottages, antique stores, and art galleries, Ogunquit is a charming little town. And of course, there's the beach—one of the best in Maine. Start your day with a hearty breakfast at the Cove Café and head to Ogunquit Beach to see why Maine's indi-



The quintessential Maine feast—steamed lobster from the Portland Lobster Company.



Portland's working port, which ships live lobster all throughout the United States and Canada.

genous Abenaki people named this town "beautiful place by the sea." It's the kind of beach you'd expect in California, not New England.

Like any resort town, Ogunquit can be swamped with tourists in the summer. We avoided much of the bustle by staying at the Cliff House Resort and Spa, which has housed visitors to Ogunquit since just after the American Civil War. In an area rich with stunning ocean views, the cliff overlooking the Atlantic on which the hotel sits simply can't be beat.

After just a week, we're back on the I-93, heading home. I reflect on what this lovely coastal destination has to offer, and it becomes clear that Portland—

and all of Maine—are more than a sum of their parts. There's a certain joie de vivre here, an unmistakable contentment locals seem to have that can only come from knowing there's no other place they'd rather be. Living by the ocean must have that affect.

As we cross the border back into Canada, I know our son is too young to remember anything we've shown him. I also know that we'll be back when he's older. Just hope he likes lobster.

Chris Mallinos is an Ottawa-based journalist whose work has appeared on six continents and in seven languages. He can be reached at www.chrismallinos.com



Ogunquit Beach, one of Maine's finest, and a wonderful place to spend a day.