

# The Boston Globe

*Near Portland Harbor, but feeling far away*

**By Patricia Harris and David Lyon**  
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PORTLAND, Maine - It's easy to overlook Portland as a summer getaway destination (after all, it's not exactly a beach town), but when we arrived on a steamy July afternoon a gentle breeze was blowing in off Casco Bay and the city was a full 10 degrees cooler than Boston.

Despite its name, the Portland Harbor Hotel isn't quite on the water, but it does sit on the fringe of the Old Port, just two streets up from the docks. The hotel opened in July 2002 on a site formerly occupied by a parking garage and has already annexed an adjoining building, built a small addition, and renovated some of its public spaces. Come winter, we imagine that the wing chairs gathered around the massive stone fireplace in the lobby will be the most coveted seats in the house.

Although the reservations clerk had warned us of possible street noise, we booked a room with a queen bed and a city view. When we checked in, our reservation had been upgraded to a slightly more expensive garden-view room (number 234) that looked out on the hotel's lushly planted courtyard.

The room, which spread across an interior corner of the hotel, was awkwardly shaped, but the cheerful blue-white-and-yellow decor drew our eyes to color and details rather than the peculiar floor plan. The walls were painted a creamy white below the chair rail and a sunny yellow above, punctuated by sky blue drapes. A comfortable chair in a white-blue-and yellow striped fabric nestled in the corner between two windows, and the looming wooden armoire did double duty as a closet and a place to hide the TV behind doors. A matching ottoman was pulled up to the chair, ideal for one person stretching out with a book. For those who prefer pixels to pages, a large wooden desk with leather swivel chair and both wired and wireless Web access occupied the wall between the armoire and the door.

It was too nice a day to stay inside. Rather than head toward the docks, we strolled into the heart of the Old Port shopping area, which manages to sustain a fresh, uniquely Portland identity with its mix of arty shops, galleries, and quirky boutiques. (If you want outlets, Kittery and Freeport are close enough.) Portland is also known for a strong dining scene. With so many good restaurants in the immediate neighborhood, we expected the hotel dining room to be little more than a service restaurant. We were surprised to discover that the hotel touts it as a big asset.

Eve's at the Garden was completely renovated this spring and the result is a warm, clubby space with cozy booths along one wall, tables and chairs by big windows looking out into the courtyard, and a two-sided fireplace dividing the dining room from the bar. As part of the renovation, the bar area was enlarged and when we arrived for dinner, a large group was

gathered around the bar, drinking, talking, and pretty much ignoring the Red Sox game on the flat screen TV above the fireplace.

The hotel has succeeded in creating a lively gathering spot (our waiter later confirmed that many locals are regulars), but we opted instead for a wrought iron table outside next to the courtyard's bubbling fountain. With brick pavers, a grape arbor over the door, beds of lavender and lush greenery worthy of a upscale garden center, the courtyard needed no improvement and was wisely left alone during the renovations. While most of the folks at the other tables (notably several smokers) were enjoying drinks and casual snacks, we wanted to sample executive chef Jeff Landry's more ambitious offerings.

Former Maine Restaurant Association chef of the year, Landry has created a menu that can serve hotel guests in a hurry or let diners settle in for a multicourse Mediterranean meal. We started with a half-sized Caesar salad with tangy sourdough croutons, and fried melt-in-your-mouth Damariscotta oysters served with superfluous but tasty sweet fennel and a chili aioli. Our main courses had a distinct Italian accent: handmade braised beef ravioli, roast pork with sour cherry sauce, and creamy polenta supercharged with Gorgonzola. Desserts are full-bodied and undainty - in our case, a volcanically molten chocolate cake with caramel sauce, and a sophisticated cherry and pistachio clafouti in a puddle of very vanilla crème anglaise.

As the sun set, the cool evening air took on a hint of lavender. We could almost imagine that we were in the south of France - except that the gulls honking ay-UNH, ay-UNH overhead told us we were still in Maine.

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## ***If You Go***

### ***Portland Harbor Hotel***

*468 Fore St.*

*Portland, Maine*

*888-798-9090, 207-775-9090*

*[portlandharborhotel.com](http://portlandharborhotel.com)*

***What we liked most:*** *Relaxed, casual style of the hotel.*

***What we liked least:*** *Valet parking only (\$15 a night).*

***What surprised us:*** *The lush courtyard garden in the middle of the city.*

***You know you're at the Portland Harbor Hotel when . . .*** *you have to climb a long staircase (or ride the elevator) to reach the lobby from the street.*

***Rates:*** *The hotel has 95 rooms, with another six in the new addition becoming available by summer's end. Published rates for double rooms range \$219-\$319 per night. We paid \$269 for Room 234 on a weekday in high season. Eve's at the Garden is open daily for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Dinner entrees range \$10-\$32.*