

DESTINATION

Kittery

Foreside

A Tiny Urban Center Comes Roaring Back to Life

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A sky- and seascape as seen from nearby Kittery Point, looking south over Portsmouth Harbor, with the lighthouse at Fort Constitution in the distance.

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On display at Lil's Café, pastries savory and sweet—including triple-chocolate brownies, flourless peanut-butter cookies, spinach-and-feta quiche, and, on stand, those famous crullers.



was made out of necessity, as we weren't going to make it through dinner without a strong cup of coffee. But as soon as the barista heard we were first-timers, she insisted that we try their famous crullers. Before we could protest, we were tucking into impossibly eggy and light, tender and spongy crullers. Although later our bartender at The Black Birch would admonish us for starting our evening of eating with doughnuts, we had no regrets. When we returned the next morning—for more crullers, plus a flaky chocolate croissant for good measure—we lingered a bit longer to soak up the warm coffeehouse vibe. Assistant manager Mia Marzelli found a few minutes to chat with us, calling Kittery Foreside a “mini-Portsmouth,” unique and fun, but not overdone. “We have that nice local feel,” Marzelli says, “that Portsmouth has sort of lost.”

If crullers and croissants sound a bit heavy for

he first point of entry to Maine for many travelers, Kittery has long been known for one thing: outlet shopping. Although it's only a short drive across the river from trendy Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Kittery has historically played second fiddle to its neighbor, serving primarily as a destination for bargain hunters. With the revitalization of the downtown area known as Kittery Foreside, however, there's many a reason for visitors to make the trip across the bridge and check out a place that is becoming a key player in Maine's burgeoning food, drink, and art scenes.

Late last fall, we spent a weekend dedicated to eating and drinking our way through Kittery Foreside, determined to see if it lived up to all the buzz. As we drove up sleepy Government Street and into Wallingford Square, the heart of Kittery Foreside, we wondered briefly how much such a compact place could really offer. In fact, just a single block of establishments makes up most of the downtown area. We quickly realized, however, that what it lacks in size it makes up for in quality. Within a quarter-mile radius, we found crispy thin-crust wood-fired pizza, creative modern cocktails, superb gelato, the best crullers we've ever had, local artisanal roast beef, and a whole host of people who quickly welcomed us into their intimate community.

MORNING Crullers, Croissants, and Coffee

Lil's Café, located in the sunny corner spot of the main Wallingford Square building, seems to be where just about everyone starts their day. With its huge picture windows, warm brick walls, and platters of home-baked pastries, it would be equally appealing to pass the time there on a bright Saturday morning or a gray winter afternoon. Our first stop at the café



first thing in the morning, **The Maine Squeeze**, a smoothie and juice stand that shares outdoor seating with Lil's, provides a lighter option. Built into an old drive-through bank kiosk, the outdoor spot is only open seasonally, unlike their two Portland locations. They offer an array of healthy and tasty drinks, like the Kale Storm smoothie, a blend of mango, spinach, kale, and apple cider, and the Liquid Sunshine Juice, which combines kale, spinach, carrot, cucumber, ginger, and apple for an energizing dose of vegetables.

A third breakfast option, **Stella's Sweet Café**, is just around the corner and sports a light, fifties feel. They serve a diner-style breakfast and lunch, and a wonderful selection of gelati. Deciding that a little midday gelato never hurt anyone, we ordered a float with limoncello gelato, Amarena cherry, and Prosecco—because if you're going to have gelato at noon, why not go for broke and have some Prosecco too? When we raved about the float, Diane Wyman, the owner of Stella's and a longtime Kittery resident, took us through a tasting of the other gelati—coconut stracciatella, salted caramel, grapefruit, espresso—all incredible.

NOON Pizza, Sliders, and Beer

For a casual lunch, **AJ's Wood Grill Pizza** offers thin-crust pizzas and a selection of burgers and sandwiches. Directly across the street from Lil's, AJ's has a sub-shop feel, but with elevated fare and a commitment to using sustainably sourced and organic ingredients. We loved the Mediterranean pizza, which had a generous amount of sharp blue cheese, fat daubs of sticky balsamic fig jam, and a sprinkling of salty prosciutto bits. If you're not craving pizza,



Left: The Mediterranean pie at AJ's Wood Grill Pizza, with prosciutto, balsamic fig jam, blue cheese, and arugula, offers a blast of flavors from all over its namesake region.

Above: Three seasonal selections from the tasting room at Tributary Brewing Company. *From left*, pale ale, pumpkin ale, and oatmeal stout.

Anju Noodle Bar was highly recommended. Or, if you're visiting in warmer weather, poke your head into **Maine Meat**, where co-owner Jarrod Spangler is happy to wrap house-roasted cold cuts for a few simple sandwiches. Choose from the neatly arranged selection of accompaniments, including Maine-made mustard and all sorts of gourmet pickles, for the perfect lunch outdoors. An ideal place, just two miles up Route 103, is Fort McClary State Park, with spectacular views and grounds.

A short ten-minute walk from AJ's and its Wallingford Square neighbors, **Tributary Brewing Company**, opened by husband-and-wife team Tod and Galen Mott in September, adds fresh local beer to Kittery Foreside's offerings. Tod is the master brewer responsible for the original Harpoon IPA and Portsmouth Brewery's Kate the Great Imperial Ale. Together with Galen, he conjured Tributary Brewing Company into existence through a crowd-funded Kickstarter campaign. They have a beautiful new brewery and tasting room with a bar, banquet tables, and some cozy couches by the window. Katie, their placid white Lab, lounges by the door, completing the relaxed atmosphere. On tap in October they had a pale ale, an IPA, an oatmeal stout, and a pumpkin ale. All of the beers were full of flavor and had the advantage of being incredibly fresh. Tributary's tasting room is open Wednesday through Sunday, and they only plan to distribute locally, so you'll have to make the trip to give their brews a try.

Parked outside the brewery, **Belle's on Wheels** is Justin Rexroad's food-truck experiment, specializing in gourmet sliders. An obvious match for the Motts' brews, it's just another example of Kittery's people collaborating and building on one another's success. We managed to catch this wood-paneled lavender



Dinner at Anneke Jans features upscale-bistro fare, as in this brisket on rye toast with a fried egg, and such lovely local touches as the Little Bay oysters, harvested less than ten miles away.



truck on its first official day serving, sampling a delicious sirloin burger, ground on-site, and a short-rib slider braised in Tributary’s oatmeal stout. Rexroad intends to set up shop in the Tributary lot for a year, so hungry visitors can order some sliders, stop in the taproom for a drink, and pop back outside once their snacks are ready.

NIGHT
Cocktails and Candlelight

For the visitor hungry for more than pastries and beer, Kittery Foreside has no shortage of places offering a proper meal. Opened in 2011, **The Black Birch**, a farm-to-table restaurant with a laid-back air, has quickly built up a well-deserved reputation for great food and cocktails in a casual setting. At five o’clock on an off-season Saturday, there was already a line out the door, but we managed to snag seats at the bar for a quick drink and appetizer. We spent a short but pleasant half hour sipping cocktails—including the Pain Don’t Hurt, a mixture of cold-brew coffee, mezcal, Cynar, and lemon zest—noshing on rich duck rillettes on toast, and ogling our neighbors’ entrées before heading down the street to **Anneke Jans** for dinner.

Jarrold Spangler, co-owner and nose-to-tail butcher, presides over the counter at Maine Meat.



Although well-established Anneke Jans has been open for more than ten years, it has also benefited from the recent development in the area. “It has really just been booming in the past six months,” shares owner Jason Canty. “We’ve become like an extension of Portsmouth, and we get more and more people just wandering through.” The well-dressed and subdued crowd at Anneke Jans is decidedly different from the flannel-clad folks at the Birch. People come to Anneke Jans for the ambience and elegance of a traditional evening out as much as for the food.

The bistro-style menu is fairly traditional but with modern touches—the roasted-beet salad is served with candied pistachios, the salmon entrée is poached in cider, and the mussels are served in a blue-cheese cream sauce. For a local touch, try the Little Bay oysters, grown less than ten miles away off Newington’s Fox Point. Our favorite dish of the night was the sweet-potato custard, served as an appetizer with roasted pumpkin seeds and a green salad. For a cream-based dish it was light and mild, almost refreshing. Most of all, though, we enjoyed the somewhat forgotten experience of a leisurely meal in a tablecloth-and-candlelight setting.

Tulsi, a critically acclaimed Indian restaurant in the Foreside, is a third option for a more formal dinner out. Although we didn’t have a chance to eat there, we heard only good things about its traditional North Indian menu. When we peeked inside at the brightly painted walls and warm décor we quickly added it to our checklist of places for next time.



For warm-weather visits, consider a simple picnic at nearby Fort McClary State Park. Among other treats, ours featured house-made roast beef from Maine Meat and Raye’s Winter Garden Mustard.

NEXT TIME

Kittery Foreside is worth a trip (or two or three), and we’ve already laid out an eating schedule for our next visit. There will be a full meal at The Black Birch, for sure, and a dinner at Tulsi. We’ll stop in at Tributary to taste whatever seasonal brews the Motts are offering, and swing by Stella’s for new gelato flavors to try. And of course, we won’t be leaving without a box of Lil’s crullers to take home. But beyond the food, we’ll be back to experience Kittery Foreside’s wonderful, welcoming community, surely a critical factor in this area’s success.

Where to Stay

Although there are limited options for overnight stays in Kittery itself, both nearby Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and York, Maine, offer plenty of choices. While Portsmouth offers the convenience of walking over the bridge to Kittery (and exploring all the great food and drink that Portsmouth has to offer), York, only a twenty-minute drive, has gorgeous beaches and waterfront views.

Ale House Inn
This contemporary boutique hotel is located in a former brewery warehouse and has a decidedly trendy style.

121 Bow Street, Portsmouth, N.H.
Off-season rooms start at \$129

Coachman Inn
Simply appointed, but clean and modern, this budget option is right on convenient Route 1.

380 U.S. Route 1, Kittery, Maine
Off-season rooms start at \$80

The Hotel Portsmouth
With a clean design and unique spaces, ranging from a two-story loft to a pet-friendly room with a fenced-in patio, this renovated Portsmouth mansion redefines bed-and-breakfast.

40 Court Street, Portsmouth, N.H.
Off-season rooms start at \$109

Portsmouth Harbor Inn and Spa
A short ten-minute walk from the heart of Kittery Foreside, this traditional New England-style B&B offers views of the passing marine traffic, as well as an on-site day spa.

6 Water Street, Kittery, Maine
Off-season rooms start at \$155

Stage Neck Inn
The area’s premier destination resort, Stage Neck Inn offers full amenities, including beach access, golf, and a spa.

8 Stage Neck Road, York Harbor, Maine
Off-season rooms start at \$185

