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Portland, Maine Makes Headlines With Its Press Hotel

Written by Brad Rickman · April 20, 2016



Courtesy Press Hotel
Typewriters tumble down the walls—an homage to the early days at the *Press Herald*.



The former home of the *Press Herald*, now a [top new hotel of 2016](#), heralds the arrival of this can't-ignore-it-anymore city.

It was 10 months ago when I stopped by Portland's new Press Hotel—just five weeks after their opening but a full 25 years after my own departure from the city. Ours was not a tragic parting. Portland may be Maine's biggest metro, but that hadn't saved it, back then, from the obscurity of unremarkable quaintness, or from that brand of smug peculiar to the state that demands all notions "from away" be greeted with suspicion. Growing up (I'm from Yarmouth, just up Route 1), the Old Port, where the Press Hotel now stands, was the closest thing we had to a downtown hangout. And it wasn't even close. Early-80s redevelopment had transformed 18th- and 19th-century warehouses into a red-brick mall: condos, fitness centers, candle shops, and Pier 1 knockoffs. The prevailing tone was transactional nostalgia, cookie-cutter New

England seaport set-designed with city-planning sheen—not a deep wellspring of identity or local pride. Shadows cast by its West Coast namesake and big sister Boston only exacerbated the city's struggle to find space on a national stage.

2012 with the debut of [Eventide Oyster Co.](#), Portland *found* itself—and then got found. By the time I visited in 2015 momentum was heavy, propelled by a slew of James Beard Award nominations including Best New Restaurant, for [Central Provisions](#), just a few blocks from the Press; Best Chefs in the Northeast for Eventide owners Andrew Taylor and Mike Wiley; and Rising Star Chef for [Cara Stadler of Bao Bao Dumpling House](#). Next to Eventide, Wiley and Taylor had just opened [Honey Paw](#), their brilliantly quirky take on noodle bars; and a block south Damian Sansonetti had begun his love song to Italian at [Piccolo](#). And on and on. As food towns go, Portland had gone from simmer to full-on boil.

So it was a heady time for a local debut. Add to that the pressures of history: For decades, the hotel's building had housed the *Press Herald*, paper of record for the lower half of the state. Newsroom on the first floor; presses in the basement. To get to research, reporters climbed a set of spiral stairs that still rise from a lobby corner. The paper moved out in 2010, after which the building lay fallow for two years until developer Jim Brady bought it and set to filling it with a concept-driven hotel. This being Portland, he planned a destination restaurant, too—a partnership called MC Union with Mark Gaier and Clark Frasier of award-winning Arrows in Ogunquit. In late April 2015, a month before opening, the deal fell apart; Gaier and Frasier pulled out; MC Union became simply Union; and Executive Chef Josh Berry, a Maine native, took charge. As he stepped onto the big stage, he was determined to represent the region.



Courtesy Press Hotel

Foraged and fresh: the dishes at the Press Hotel.

"I can't believe I found these," Berry said, thrusting a basket of spiny crimson bulbs beneath my chin when I visited back in June 2015. Baby beets. Rare that time of year. "I ran into some guys I know at one of the markets. They held some for me."

He was getting at one of the more surprising aspects of Portland's revised character: local pride. It's Maine-based this time—Maine-inspired, Maine-run. Berry builds his menus from local farmers' markets, something that wasn't even a pipe dream back in the '80s. Self expression here meets the strictures of an ungenerous land they've all agreed to embrace; in the toil and risk of short growing seasons, brutal winters, and parsimonious flora, they find camaraderie. Favors are doled out and repaid and the byproduct—a shared belief in the future of their town—sustains them. There's something of an art community in it.

maybe, or Hugo's, Street & Co. we mix it up, depending on who's on and who's open. Some nights there'll be a crew here [at Union] while we're working. There's competition but a lot of support. We take care of each other."

At the Press, Jim Brady has chased his own singular aesthetic, one that draws on its newspaper heritage. Interiors feel cool and modern: The patterns are riffs on newspaper and printing press technology. A glass entrance wall, for instance, is leaded in the asymmetrical grid of a typesetter's drawer; desks imitate reporters' workstations from the 1920s. Room numbers are rendered in lithographic stencils and elevator walls are curtained in a lattice of steel rollers. Artifacts abound, from vintage typewriters to clothbound style guides to industrially sized clamps that look prehistoric against the lobby's clean geometries.

*"Memorable Press Herald headlines tumble down the walls
and spill across the floors in ragged alphabetical 'piles.'"*

All that history is deployed with anachronistic whimsy. Design firm Stonehill & Taylor—they did the Refinery and the Ace in NYC, among others—enlisted sculptor Matt Hutton, who teaches at the nearby Maine College of Art, to create a vernacular of oversized letterpress forms and press-plate fragments that appear in the hotel's interstitial spaces, like those bits of wall between mirrors and doors. So you're greeted everywhere by jumbles of letters—including in the hallways, where memorable *Press Herald* headlines tumble down the walls and spill across the floors in ragged alphabetical "piles." Hutton also crafted tables in biomorphic shapes; they turn up unexpectedly, voluptuous disruptions of all the hard planes and lines. The vintage-typewriter motif hits its apex beside the lobby stairs, where a pinwheel of them—all shapes, all sizes—erupts across the wall's expanse. Meanwhile, beside the front desk, their cases mix with actual folios and overnights in a jumble of suspended luggage. Both installations were designed by students from the MCA, on Congress Street just up the block.

It's the Press Hotel's own expression of the hyper-localism that defines Portland's reinvention. Rooms feature graphic tapestries by local textile artist Angela Adams and drawer partitions are made by a local leather company; beds bear comforters and throws by Maine-based Cuddledown. The lower floor has been finished as a gallery space, and carries a rotating selection from established and rising Maine stars. The Press Hotel declares itself as resolutely *Portland*.

Hotels can become anchors, focal points for the aspirations of a neighborhood, even a city. Think of the Ace in the once-workaday Flatiron, or the Dean in downtown Providence, Rhode Island. They're more than spots for a weekend stay. They've become totems for the spirit of a place, where past and future, energies and cultures collide. Design. Food. A sense of history—*local* history: The hotel personifies it. And when this happens, it's the best kind of growth, because it means that the town has self and knows what that self is—and is ready to show it off to the world. It has matured.

Will the Press Hotel do this for Portland? Time will tell. The ingredients seem to be there. Portland seems to be there, and to be ready.