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Cultured Pearl: Reborn district offers delightful taste of Portland

 By Jessica Garrison
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PORTLAND, Ore. — On a pre-dinner stroll through the Pearl District, we passed blocks of shiny new boutiques selling high-end design books, dog-grooming services and \$75 sweaters for babies. High-rise condos and bustling restaurants seemed to have sprung up on every elegant, cobblestoned corner.

"This is amazing," I said to my husband. "It's all new."

Michael rolled his eyes. It was the fifth time in 10 minutes I had expressed such sentiments.

I grew up in Portland when this area, known then as the Northwest Industrial Triangle, seemed gritty and dangerous. It was depicted in the 1989 movie *Drugstore Cowboy* as the territory of drug addicts and homeless people.

But then artists began congregating in huge numbers, gallery owners followed and today, the neighborhood, renamed the Pearl District, looks like a real estate brochure for loft living. There's free wireless, and a guide lists 29 restaurants, 11 coffee-houses and 21 art galleries.

Our plan was to eat our way across the city, punctuating our meals with strolls over the many bridges that cross the Willamette River.

Almost without exception, the food was incredible. At Fenouil, a new high-end French brasserie with big windows overlooking a new public square and fountain, our waiter delivered a tomato tart combining melt-in-your-mouth pastry and salty blue cheese and shook his head in sympathy as we described the sensory overload of our walk.

"Every day, there is something new," he said.

At Nostrana, a pizzeria on the city's east side recently

billed as Portland's best restaurant, we ate pizza with tomatoes, a tuna and white bean salad and minestrone soup. All were light, fresh and subtly seasoned.

At Bluehour, at one end of a converted loading dock, we sat in the sun next to whippets, just back from a dog show, and their owners. (Portland may be the most dog-friendly city in America. Eateries where dogs are not welcome feel obliged to put up signs to that effect.) My husband had Bluehour's spin on the blue-plate special, a fried-egg sandwich, and instead of side dishes of fast-fried onions and a slab of ham, he got caramelized fennel.

At Andina, a Peruvian restaurant, the food was good, but the cocktails were the real attraction. I had the Atardecer Porteno, which the menu described as "pink guava nectar shaken with honey-infused vodka and lime juice topped with a float of ruby port and a spritz of lime zest, served up with an anise sugar rim." A half-dozen other cocktails had ingredients just as extravagant.

Our hotel was similarly over the top. We stayed at the Hotel deLuxe, just up the hill in the city's old theater district. It bills itself as paying "homage to Hollywood's golden era." Movie stars glare out from every wall. But once you collapse into the exquisitely soft beds, it's easy to close your eyes and forget the stars.

On any visit to Portland, there are obligatory stops. One is Powell's City of Books, one of the largest independent U.S. bookstores, a place to lose yourself for hours. And now that the Pearl District has grown up around it, you can wander the stacks and then wander out and reward yourself with a good meal.

Portland, Ore., at a glance

Getting there

US Airways, Southwest, Alaska, American, Delta and United airlines fly from Phoenix to Portland.

Where to stay

■ Hotel deLuxe, 729 S.W. 15th Ave. Doubles from \$149 a night. 1-866-895-2094 or www.hoteldeluxeportland.com.

■ Jupiter Hotel, 800 E. Burnside St. Doubles from \$99 a night. 1-877-800-0004 or www.jupiterhotel.com.

Where to eat

■ Fenouil, 900 N.W. 11th Ave. Fenouil means "fennel" in French, and little sprigs of the plant grace each table. The menu includes classic French fare such as fried frog legs, along with fish, lamb and seafood paella. Entrees \$18-\$31. 1-(503)-525-2225 or www.fenouilthepearl.com.

■ Andina, 1314 N.W. Glisan St. Traditional and contemporary Peruvian dishes. The cocktails are amazing. Entrees \$17-\$29. 1-(503)-228-9535 or www.andinarestaurant.com.

■ Bluehour, 250 N.W. 13th Ave. Contemporary French and Italian food, including potato gnocchi with black truffles. Entrees \$16-\$75. 1-(503)-226-3394 or www.bluehouronline.com.

■ Nostrana, 1401 S.E. Morrison St. Some critics call this Portland's best restaurant. This cavernous place features a changing menu of pizzas, salads and soups. Pizzas from \$8, pasta from \$13, meat and seafood from \$16. 1-(503)-234-2427 or www.nostrana.com.

Things to do

■ Visit Powell's City of Books, 1005 W. Burnside. 1-(503)-228-4651 or www.powells.com.

■ The Pearl District is a lovely place to wander, shop, dine and people-watch. But all of Portland, with its miniature blocks and plentiful parks, is delightfully walkable.

Details

Oregon Tourism Commission, 1-800-547-7842 or www.traveloregon.com.