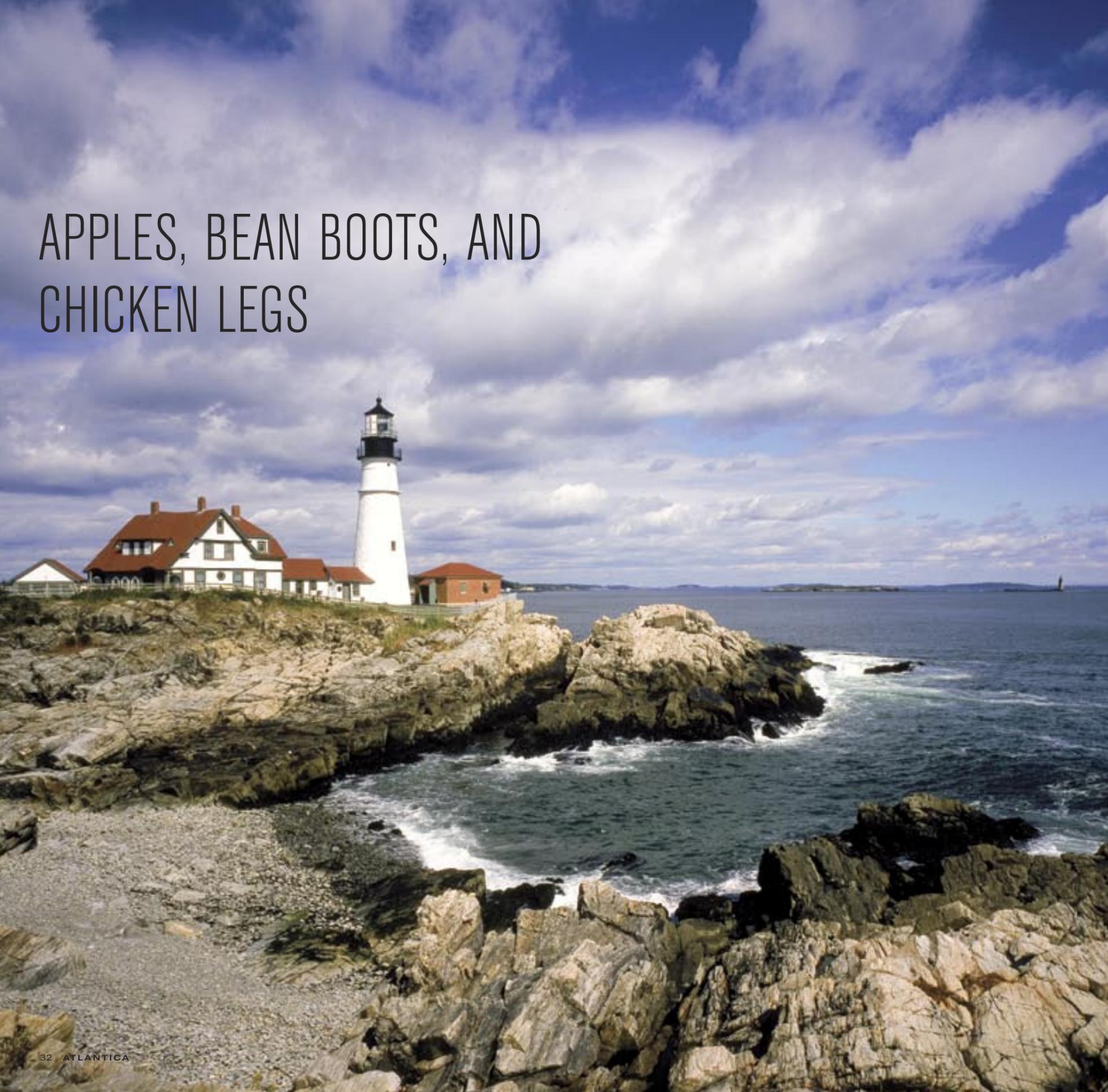


# APPLES, BEAN BOOTS, AND CHICKEN LEGS



Portland Head Light

Written by  
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Photos by  
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Defining Maine by its nickname, “Vacationland,” is a bit misleading – it’s like defining Manhattan as Times Square. The most northeastern American state is more than its storied 80-foot triple-masted wooden schooners, 200-year-old antiques, and sprawling summer homes where people like the Bushes drizzle butter over their lobster from the comfort of their seaside wicker chairs. As it turns out, local Mainers are the real, down home, hardworking, extra thick, Grade A folks. And boy, do they work long hours.

## Daybreak: Becky’s

The cook arrives at 3 am. The first waitress shows up at 3:30. Becky’s diner opens its smudged double glass doors at 4, every morning, 362.5 days a year. (They’re closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas, and half a day on Christmas Eve).

Then the four wisecracks roll into the greasy spoon on Commercial Street, the gateway to Portland’s busy fishing and ferry harbor.

Ed Walsh, Pete Matthews, Mark Siegler, and Bob Babson have almost never missed a morning at this local institution. And they’ve never switched stools. There’s always one seat between Ed and Pete. Pete, Mark, and Bob sit together, in that order.

Sarah O’Brien, 27, who works the early shift three – sometimes four – mornings a week, knows their orders by heart. The guys pay separately, and almost always leave the same amount of tip on the table using the same combinations of change and bills.

“Well, sometimes I throw a curve ball in there,” Babson says. “She’s got a calculator.”

“WELCOME TO MAINE: The Way Life Should Be” is what the blue and white traffic sign posted on Interstate 95 says as you enter the state’s southern border from New Hampshire. Maine’s standard issue license plate has a chickadee perched atop a pine cone with the word “Vacationland” written in italics.

I’ve spent four years of my life in Maine – though not exactly on vacation – where I attended Colby College, a liberal arts school founded in 1813. Colby is located in Waterville (pop. 16,000),

an hour north from Portland, the state’s largest city (pop. 64,000). My friends and I referred to our college’s tired textile town as “Watervegas,” a sarcastic reference to a place where the local pub is called “Mainely Brews” and sputtering 20-watt lightbulbs outnumber the fresh ones.

This fall, I returned to rub elbows with old Mainers and new Mainers, artists, farmers, and locals like the four grizzled men in their fifties and sixties sitting next to me who’ve ordered the same thing for the last fifteen years. I may have returned to Vacationland, but these guys don’t take vacations.

Walsh drives the Irving oil truck parked outside. His usual: a coffee and a “medium rare” blueberry muffin (read: fresh out of the oven). Plus one to go.

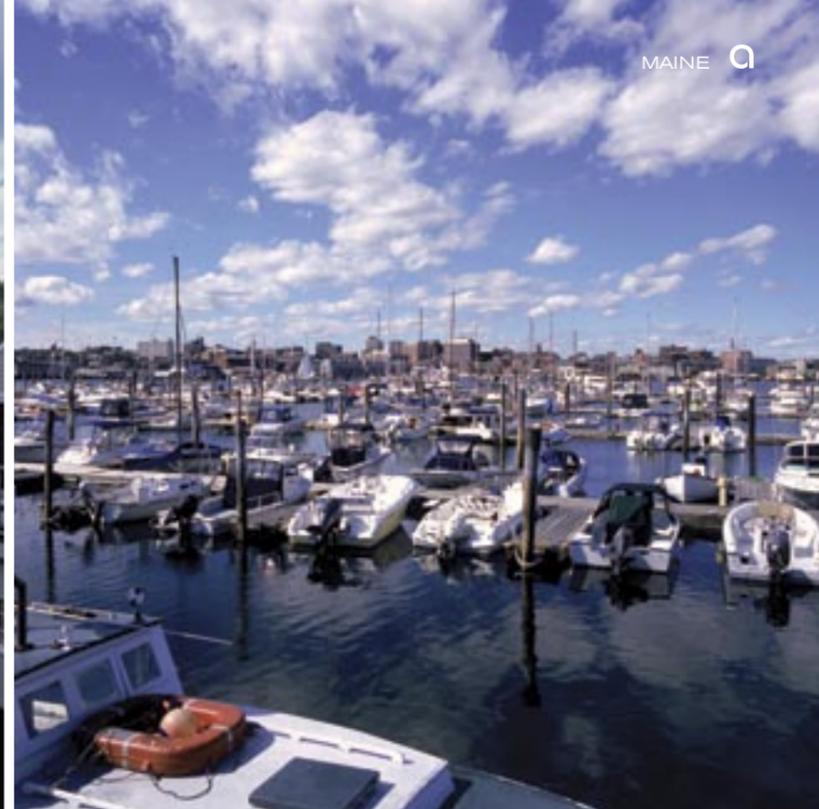
Matthews is a recreational fisherman. He appears to be the ringleader of the crew, and sticks to three heavy mugs of black coffee, each doctored with two creams and an Equal.

Siegler works the graveyard shift at a distribution plant that prints the local newspapers. He’s all about the scrambled eggs, homefries, wheat toast (“less cholesterol”), and coffee.

Babson has exactly half an hour to eat his scrambled eggs, homefries, white toast, and coffee before he has to check in for work at the local semi-conductor plant.

I take the empty chair between Ed and Pete, asking Pete about his usual hours around this joint.

“Unusual. Usually from dahk to 3:30 in the mahnin,” he says in his thick Maine accent. “Some nights I don’t sleep. I took the night off tonight



Scenes from Portland, Cumberland, and Kennebunkport, Maine.

His usual: a coffee and a “medium rare” blueberry muffin, (read: fresh out of the oven). Plus one to go.

“I knew a friend of a friend. I said, ‘Ahmed, how do I get Maine?’”

because it was raining. When I’m tired I lie down and it don’t matter where. Sometimes it’s in the parking lot.”

I ask Pete where he met these guys, with whom he’s eaten breakfast more than 5,000 times. “Aw, I just found these guys crawlin’ down the street,” he smirks, shifting in his stool.

“What do you do during the two-and-a-half days the diner’s closed?” I ask no one in particular.

“We tailgate it,” Babson says, deadpan.

Becky Rand, 52, opened her eponymous diner on Hobson’s Wharf in 1991 with USD 55,000 of borrowed money and a prayer. “There was a need for this,” Rand told me later. “You know, the guy with the grease on his clothes and the fiberglass in his hair needs a place to eat. Everyone wants to eat a good meal. A homemade meal.”

At the time, her children were between the ages of one and 12, and her husband had just left her. She waited tables breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and baked pies during her “free” time to make ends meet. She had no health insurance and slowly began to lose her house. “One sick

kid would wipe out my money for the week,” Rand said. She has since put all of her children but one through college. “You’ve gotta fake it ‘til you make it.”

Every one of her kids either works or has worked at the diner. Rand’s dad comes in three times a day – at night he mops the floor. Her three sons, all lobstermen, catch the lobsters she serves for dinner.

Rand’s hours? Usually 2:30 pm until 2:30 am. Her office, the size of a janitorial closet, is crammed to the ceiling with stuff, and there’s no room on the desk to complete paperwork for bills or payroll. Come midnight, she lays her spreadsheets out on the front counter and gets her work done.

Nowadays she’s usually out before the 4 am boys roll in, but not always.

“There’s a buzz at 4 am,” Becky says. “They’re almost always chatting about the weather while nursing their coffee. As it gets colder, they linger a little longer. And, you know, I always feel a responsibility. When we close those two and a half days, I want to be here for them.”



BECKY RAND

### 10 am: Al-Amin Halal Market

Behind the market’s counter a Somali man cuts chicken legs on a scale. Dog-eared posters advertising calling card rates from “I ♥ Africa” and “Mother Africa” are taped in the window of the Al-Amin Halal Market, situated in a downtrodden neighborhood of strip malls and bus depots on the outskirts of Portland’s hip, brick-lined downtown with views of the schooner and trawler-clogged harbor.

*Al Hamin* roughly translates to “trust place.” The market doubles as a restaurant and, as it turns out, a community center, where fellow Somalis get together to hang out and gossip.

Jars of ghee, seven-ounce bags of golden raisins, cans of baby formula, and bedding sheathed in thick, dusty plastic line the shelves. Ten-kilogram sacks of Aahu Barah basmati rice lie haphazardly stacked on the floor below a Somali flag that hangs from the ceiling.

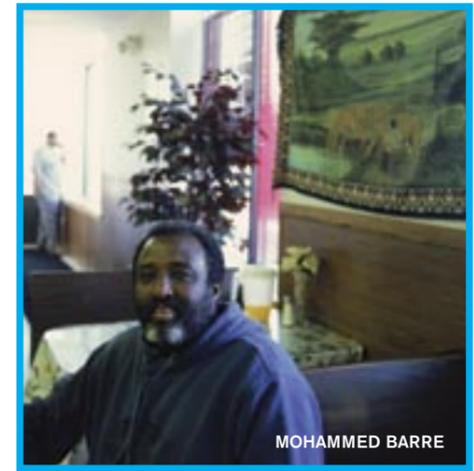
The level of cleanliness appears questionable, at best. When my eyes bulge at the amount of meat contained in the adjacent freezer, the butch-

er, who also cameos as the cashier, explains that all of it – beef, goat, chicken, fish, and camel – is *halal*, the Muslim equivalent of kosher. In Arabic, *halal* means “permissible;” that is, acceptable to eat according to Islamic law.

“We gather here, get information, it’s where many of us meet,” says Mohammed Barre, who enters the market on one crutch. “It’s easy, it’s in the middle. And we can buy all our groceries here.” Barre, 46, was a linguistic anthropologist in his native Somalia and migrated to the United States ten years ago via Kenya, where he was a refugee. He and his family have lived in Maine for the last five years. It’s a place, he says, that feels safer than anywhere he’s lived.

“I’ve never felt threatened here,” Barre says. “My name is Mohammad, you see, and sometimes that’s a very bad name.”

Officially, 36,689 immigrants resided in Maine as of 2000, the most recent census year. That’s about three percent of the state’s population of 1.3 million. But because of inherent problems in census data gathering, attorney and Executive Director of the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project Beth



MOHAMMED BARRE



Scenes from Portland, Wiscasset, Cumberland, and Kennebunkport, Maine.

Stickney estimates that a more accurate number is between 46,000 and 65,000.

While immigration stats might not be accurate, there are 51 different languages spoken in the Portland Public School District. More than 30 of those, including Somali, are spoken at Portland High School alone, which also accommodates Muslim students when they need a place to pray.

Barre estimates, and Stickney agrees with his numbers, that there are between 3,500 and 4,000 Somalis who have migrated to Portland, primarily in the last six years. "Once you have a nucleus of people, those people tell friends and other family members and it grows from there," Stickney told me later. "They hear that it's calm, quiet, the schools are good, and it feels safe."

For Barre, that's how it worked. "I knew a friend of a friend. I said, 'Ahmed, how do I get Maine?'" he says over the din of five more Somalis who've arrived at the market on a Saturday during Ramadan. "And I do the same for people. It's 'Hey, we have this empty space beside our bed, you can come sleep here.' We do this so we can keep our culture, our tradition, our religion, together."

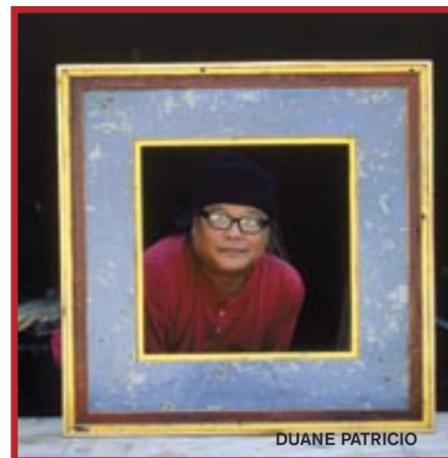
**1 pm: The Woodworker's Studio**

Duane Patricio sharpens his number 2 pencil with a handheld utility knife. "Doesn't everybody do that?" he asks. Every couple of minutes our conversation is interrupted by the intermittent humming of the air compressor that powers the nail gun hanging from the ceiling of his downtown Danforth Street studio.

City promoters sometimes tout Portland, just two hours from Boston, as a mini-San Francisco. It's true, there are certainly steep streets rising from the waterfront, galleries emerging from every abandoned warehouse, and cuisine fit for a true gourmand. But Portland's authentic maritime character and small-town feel gives it a character of its own.

Patricio, 53, is a woodworker in Portland's vibrant artist community, with midnight black hair accented by a little coarse salt. He creates tables, dressing mirrors and frames, using wood between 150 and 200 years old that he finds or is given. Most of the wood comes from weathered coastal Maine homes and barns, but, he says,

"You wouldn't be stretched to find me searching around a dumpster if I see something cool."



"You wouldn't be stretched to find me searching around a dumpster if I see something cool."

In 1997, Patricio was commissioned by MTV to make eight framed dressing mirrors for its then-new studio in Times Square. Nine years later, the mirrors still hang. He is often commissioned to frame work by local artists, including painter Matt Welch, and he has also made furniture for the CEO of the well-heeled Sundance Catalogue.

I count 11 different workspaces in Patricio's 4,000-square foot space, five ceiling fans, one basketball hoop, and who-the-hell-knows how many gallons of finish. Wood of all shapes, sizes, widths, and colors are piled against the walls of the one-time rigging warehouse with a view of the water where Patricio, a Hawaiian native who's been living in Portland for 20 years, lives and works with his girlfriend and his son, Kai.

His buzzwords: "texture, color, scale." It's in the age of the wood, the patina, and the richness of the colors – from layers of accumulated paints aged over time and the harshness of coastal Maine weather – where he finds the

greatest beauty. A more formal phrase for this, he explains, is Wabi-Sabi, a Japanese concept grounded in the idea of transience.

"I find beauty in things on the verge of decay. You see, most woodworkers need and want very precise tools. All of mine are very basic. I actually *want* these saw marks here." He points to an unfinished frame. "They represent 100 years of history."

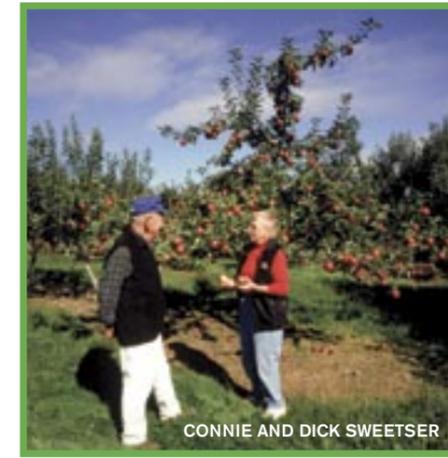
**5 pm: Sweetser's Apple Barrel and Orchards**

The apple doesn't seem to fall too far from the tree in the Sweetser family.

Connie and Dick Sweetser are sixth generation Maine orchardists. They sell their hand-picked apples in white paper bags from the wooden fruit stand in front of their 14-acre home in Cumberland, a small but rapidly growing town 15 minutes north of Portland. The homestead has been in the family since 1810.

"My great, great grandfather, Sam, did some of the planting out there," says Dick Sweetser, 80,

After 80 years of apple tasting, Dick's favorite is still the classic McIntosh.



City promoters sometimes tout Portland, just two hours from Boston, as a mini-San Francisco.



Portland, Maine.



pointing to his mini apple empire planted behind their barn. Almost 200 years later, the family can still grow a mean McIntosh – and 34 other varieties of apples so crisp it almost sounds like I’m biting into a cracker.

After 80 years of apple tasting, Dick’s favorite is still the classic McIntosh. Connie, 76, likes the Red Gravenstein, or, she says, “whatever one I happen to reach.”

Every fall the Sweetsers, with the help of six part-time helpers, pick between 2,500 and 3,000 bushels of apples from their 1,000 trees, which by any standard is considered a small operation. The entire state of Maine produces just over one million bushels of apples per year. Washington State, the nation’s largest apple grower, produces somewhere between 80 and 100 million bushels (a bushel of apples weighs about 42 pounds).

Orchards in Maine, the Sweetsers say, are a dying industry, and it’s hard to keep young people in the business. Not to mention it’s a lot of work.

The Sweetsers, who married in 1951, have battled various pests over the years, including some who are bigger than they are: deer, who like to snack on apples as much as humans do, and who also like to feed on the trees’ soft bark.

“Essentially we have to coexist with them,” says Dick. “But we’ve recently erected an electric fence around 200 of the newer trees.” They’ve also staged battles against foxes, coyotes, raccoons, porcupines, wild turkeys, and even, yes, one big bad moose that has trampled their grounds. Three years ago they lost 10 percent of their crop thanks to a particularly harsh winter.

Winter is the pruning season, spring is for fertilizing (the Sweetsers are not organic apple farmers, but have a policy of spraying as little as possible), summer is mowing, more mowing, and monitoring the trees, and fall, Connie says, is the season of “pick, pick, pick. Dick raises them and I pick them. We’re a good contract, aren’t we?”



Wiscasset, Maine.



Scenes from Freeport and Boothbay Harbor, Maine.

## 11 pm: L.L. Bean, Freeport

My eyes are blurry as I almost sleepwalk from my rented Chevy Cavalier parked on Main Street in Freeport into L.L.Bean. It's 11 at night, and the graveyard shift is about to begin.

And L.L.Bean, Maine's best-known clothing and outdoors store, is still open. In fact, L.L.Bean's flagship store never closes. There aren't even locks on the doors. It opened its doors in 1917 down the street from its present location in Freeport, 20 minutes northeast of Portland, and has been open 24 hours a day since 1951.

Ok, well, that's not exactly true. It has closed four days in its 55 years: two subsequent Sundays in the spring of 1962 when Maine changed its alcohol laws; 23 November 1963, the national day of mourning following JFK's assassination; and 5 February 1967, the day L.L.Bean's founder, Leon Leonwood Bean, passed away.

Even though it's late, there are customers still milling around. In the women's section upstairs, someone tries on a cashmere sweater. Another zips up a baffled down vest. A couple of college-age kids check out the canvas tote bags downstairs, where shopper Ian Weiss sits on a wooden bench with six different shoeboxes strewn on the floor. At the moment it looks like the brown leather Rogues are earning top honors.

"My girlfriend would tell you I like really ugly but comfortable shoes," says Weiss, who's home for the weekend from New York City. Weiss's dad, Erick, who lives in Freeport, votes for the black Merrell Passport slip-ons, size 9.5.

"I guess I've got to decide," Ian says.

"No you don't," Erick says. "You're right here. You can come back anytime."

Over the years, L.L.Bean has become synonymous with Maine, and its flagship store is the crown maiden of Freeport's more than 170 outlet stores. L.L.Bean sells nearly 500 different styles of shoes, but none even come close in popularity or fame to the "Bean Boot," the first hunting boot created by L.L. himself in 1911 when he took a pair of rubber shoe bottoms from his store and asked a local shoemaker to stitch leather to the top.

Together, Ian and his dad talk about L.L.Bean like it's a regular stop on the to-do list. "We always come after dinner," Erick Weiss says. "It's way quieter. Sometimes we walk. Usually we ride our bikes."

Manager Phyllis Brannon's shift ends at 12:15 am; the third shift, as its referred to in employee parlance, begins at 11:45 pm. "There's minimal customer traffic during the graveyard, but they have to do everything – man the registers, recovery, straightening up from the day. It's like little elves came in and fixed everything up."

Then she pauses.

"Well, we've had people take bikes out for little joyrides at night but they always return them. And once there was a couple sleeping in sleeping bags in one of the tents. The tent was zippered shut. I won't tell you what kind of noises we heard." [a](#)

"My girlfriend would tell you I like really ugly but comfortable shoes."

# AD



## ALL (OR AT LEAST SOME) OF YOUR MAINE FAQs, ANSWERED

*What?! I heard I had to hitchhike to Maine?!*

No way! You can rent a car, or Amtrak's Downeaster will **whisk you straight into downtown Portland** from Boston's North Station in 2.5 hours. Bonus: stops in the **quaint towns** of Wells, Saco, and Old Orchard Beach. Annoying: the schedule isn't as frequent as the bus. From USD 22. [thedowneaster.com](http://thedowneaster.com)

A favorite among college kids because it's **cheap, fast, and more flexible than the train**, Concord Trailways will take you from Logan International Airport and/or Boston's South Station to Portland in 2.5 hours. It's also the best way to get to all points along the coast, including Brunswick (home of Bowdoin College, Colby's fierce rival), Bath, Wiscasset (great spot for **antiquing**), Damariscotta, Rockland, and Camden. [concordtrailways.com](http://concordtrailways.com)

*I heard I have to pitch a tent in Portland? Tell me this isn't true.*

Of course that's not true. Two of the best places to stay: The Portland Regency Hotel and Spa is located in an armory originally built in 1895 in the **historic Old Port**. 207-774-4200, From USD 149. [theregency.com](http://theregency.com)

The Pomegranate Inn in Portland's West End is a **great bed and breakfast** just a couple minutes walk to the city center. The house is filled with antiques and they chef up a feast for breakfast, including **blueberry pancakes**. 207-772-1006, From USD 95. [pomegranateinn.com](http://pomegranateinn.com)

*And the food rocks, doesn't it?*

Yes. Two thumbs up for Cinque Terre, which specializes in **northern Italian cuisine** using ingredients primarily grown in Maine. Stellar wine list. Be sure to make a reservation. 207-347-6154. [cinqueterremaine.com](http://cinqueterremaine.com)

Gilbert's Chowder House on 92 Commercial Street serves its **clam and seafood chowder** in Styrofoam cups. Perfect, so you can take one to go. 207-871-5636.

**One of the best lobster rolls** in Maine, hands down, is from The Lobster Shack on Two Lights Road in Cape Elizabeth (20 minutes from Portland, near the beautiful Cape Elizabeth Light). P.S. Don't forget to order the fried clams. 207-799-1677. [lobstershack-twolights.com](http://lobstershack-twolights.com)

*How can I track down everyone and everywhere you mentioned in your story?*

It's all here, in the order it appears (all addresses are in Portland, unless otherwise noted):

**Becky's**

390 Commercial Street  
207-773-7070  
[beckysdiner.com](http://beckysdiner.com)

**Al-Amin Halal Market**

269 Saint John Street  
207-774-3220

**Duane Patricio**

54 Danforth Street  
207-773-2444

**Matt Welch**

[mattwelchstudio.com](http://mattwelchstudio.com)

**Sweetser's Apple Barrel and Orchards**

19 Blanchard Road  
Cumberland, ME  
207-829-3074  
[maineapple.com](http://maineapple.com)

**L.L.Bean**

95 Main Street  
Freeport, ME  
800-559-0747  
[lbean.com](http://lbean.com)

Icelandair flies 7 times a week to Boston from Keflavik International Airport.