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Maine course

There's much more to Kittery than the outlets



While Kittery, Maine, is just across the river from New Hampshire, there's no mistaking you've left the Granite State once you cross the Piscataqua River bridge.

Look past the many outlet shops that line Route 1 in this coastal town and you'll find an authentic, deeper character that screams Vacationland.

Start with a quick trip into the Kittery Trading Post. There, you'll find an outdoors enthusiast's heaven. Bypass the big-box, chain shops for an experience that's much more — here's that word again — authentic. A sprawling building packed with anything anyone might want for hunting, fishing, hiking, boating, archery, shooting, climbing and camping, this landmark is overflowing with Maine character. The floors creak, the employees are locals and the accents are real. This maze of a store has been providing the region's outdoors enthusiasts with necessities (and not-so-necessary but still really cool stuff) since the 1930s. A walk past the carved totems outside will lead to the cavernous, winding interior of this outdoors shopper's paradise, most of which smells of roasted almonds and cashews thanks to the fudge and snack counter located just next to the stairs that lead to a second floor full of even more stuff.

In just a few weeks, the annual Septemberfest will take place at the Trading



CALM BEFORE THE STORM: Things can get pretty busy at the popular Bob's Clam Hut on Route 1 in Kittery, Maine.

Post. Attractive sales might be the main draw, but games, contests, giveaways, live music and other entertainment will keep you rooted for some time. Septemberfest — regulars await this celebration every year — will take place Sept. 2-8.

At some point the shopping will wear you down, and you'll have to eat. Walk out the main entrance and keep going for about 200 feet and you'll land right in the middle of one of the town's most popular eateries.

You'll know you're at Bob's Clam Hut (315 Route 1, Kittery, Maine) when the traffic starts to get a little hectic. Right next door to

the Trading Post, Bob's may look like a modest clam shack — the kind that seem to outnumber Dunkin' Donuts from Essex, Mass., to Portland, Maine. But there's a reason why this smallish operation needs parking lot attendants to untangle the tightly packed lot. Its reputation brings in the outlet shoppers by the carloads.

Fresh ingredients are a great start — Spruce Creek, which feeds into the Atlantic, is just feet away — so that's almost a given. It's the authenticity that keeps generations of customers returning, owner Michael Landgarten said. Landgarten, a Worcester native,

started out as a computer programmer after graduating from Bowdoin College in 1980, coupled with a side career busking on the streets of Boston. Originally an attempt to support his musical side and armed with a true love for small New England clam shacks, Landgarten started looking into the restaurant industry. He bought the Kittery landmark from original owner Bob Kraft (not that Bob Kraft) on May 22, 1986 — a date immortalized in a whimsical painting in the dining room that features, believe it or not, Gilligan and the Skipper, among others. The long lines at the counter move very

quickly — years of experience have yielded a smooth operation — and workers wander through the dining room ensuring everyone has everything they need.

According to the clam connoisseur himself, though, the big draw is that it's a naked experience. The food isn't disguised by hand-fuls of salt and pepper or fried into petrification. And while some of the offerings look familiar, the natural flavors are allowed to shine here. The lobster roll (\$14.95) is packed with meat and stuffed into a buttered roll — simple and done the Maine way. Dinners come with cole slaw, fries and a roll, and include scallops

(\$21.95), haddock (\$15.95), oysters (\$22.95) and calamari (\$10.95). Market prices can cause menu prices to fluctuate slightly.

The clams are where things get interesting, however. Try the original Bob's, or sample clams done the Lillian way. Lillian was a long-time employee who brought an abundance of personality to the place, and a lifetime of experience. Insisting that Landgarten was going about his clam prep slightly wrong, she was allowed to introduce her own particular version — a labor intensive variety given an egg wash before being breaded. The results? Bob's is the original recipe — the "naked" approach — while Lillian's are fluffier and just maybe a little sweeter.

For a taste of what's happening right now in Maine cuisine, cross the road, go over the bridge spanning the Spruce Creek and try Landgarten's second eatery, Robert's Maine Grill (326 Route 1, Kittery, Maine. Just look for the lighthouse out front.) While there has been a restaurant at that location since the 1940s (Eleanor Roosevelt is said to have once dined there), the structure was rebuilt and reopened in 2006. Inspired by the architecture of the homes on Kittery Point, the space features a bright, airy, open dining room on the main floor, which leads to a deck overlooking the water. The raw bar offers instructions and explanations for the intimidated or uninitiated, and an open kitchen allows guests to see executive chef Brandon Blethen quarterback the busy space. Photographs of Maine



HEAVEN ON THE HALF SHELL: Enjoy a towering order of raw shellfish at Robert's Maine Grill, right, in Kittery, Maine. The two-story restaurant with its landmark lighthouse is located alongside Spruce Creek.



If you go

Kittery, Maine, is one hour straight up I-95 from Boston. Take exit 3 and follow your well-honed sense of savings to this outlet-packed stretch of Route 1.



KNOTTY FUN: Daredevils will be thrilled by Take Flight, Maine's largest aerial adventure course, which has more than 60 activities and a half-dozen zip lines.

Climbing ropes in Kittery visitors

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scenes taken by Landgarten and paintings by local artists line the walls leading to the second floor.

Think traditional comfort food with an upscale twist in a casual setting. Note: "Flip flops welcome" adorns the sign just off Route 1. Lobster sliders on buttermilk biscuits (\$6.50) and fried oyster sliders on a brioche bun (\$4) are a perfect example of traditional fare shown a bit of extra attention. Glidden Point oysters (\$3 each) highlight the raw bar offerings, and the restaurant's mission to "re-Maine-ify" the area is made clear in the Greenlaw garden salad: blueberries, feta, radish, roasted beets and Greenlaw Gardens greens picked that morning (\$13). The scallop and cod entrees show off the chef's skill, but for those seeking to leave the outlets of Kittery in search of the real heart of the region, try the whoopie pie with a glass of milk (\$5), or a slice of the raspberry pie (\$7.50 for a massive hunk of this dessert).

The food is locally sourced, the culture of employee inclusion carries over from Bob's (profit-sharing takes place in both spots), and a soul firmly rooted in Maine keeps everything down to earth.

Starting up again Sept. 3, Robert's Maine Grill will offer Community Suppers on Tuesdays and Wednes-

days — a \$14, three-course meal designed as a way to give guests a midweek break with an indulgent, yet affordable meal.

Just down the road, visitors can take to the air at Maine's largest aerial adventure course at Take Flight (506 Blue Star Memorial Highway, Kittery, Maine). This adventure challenge course has more than 60 activities, including six zip line tours that skim visitors across the tops of the trees at thrilling speeds. The rope courses progress in varying degrees of difficulty, topping out at 36 feet above the ground. There are six zip lines allowing participants to cruise from platform to platform during a series of 100- to 600-foot-long trips.

Time on the challenge course, which lasts two-and-a-half-hours and includes 30 minutes of ground school training, is \$40 for adults, \$25 for children 12 and younger. There's a special student rate of \$35 that's also offered to retired military and anyone older than 65.

The zip wire tours, which also last two-and-a-half-hours and include 30 minutes of preflight school, is \$59 per person.

Take Flight is open daily from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. through Labor Day. Reservations are recommended. (To book, call 207-439-8838 or go to takeflightadv.com).

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