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November 2003

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Ribollita, Portland

A cozy trattoria keeps alive the flavors of the city's Little Italy.

IN the colonial era, Middle Street, now on the eastern edge of the Old Port, was the true center of Portland — or Falmouth, as the city was then called. Since that time, Portland has burned twice (in 1775 at the hands of the British and again during the Great Fire of 1866). As such, the area has had plenty of chances to remake itself — as a Jewish and Italian community in the late 1800s and early 1900s and as the ragged site of urban renewal in the aftermath of World War II. Now, in 2003, the block includes an eclectic mix of restaurants, a sports shop, and (during the day) plenty of workers in their long rubber boots and hairnets, on break and leaning against the brick wall of their employer, Jordan's Meats.

At least one of the street's eating establishments harkens explicitly back to earlier days. In fact, it was the area's Italian history that pushed Kevin Quiet, chef-owner of Ribollita, to open up back in 1996. Quiet had worked as sous chef at Kennebunkport's Cape Arundel Inn and chef at Portland's Street & Co., so starting his own place was a logical next step. That said, he didn't have a specific vision in mind until a storefront at 41 Middle Street opened up. "I'd been traveling in Italy," Quiet explains,

Located in what was once the heart of Portland's Italian immigrant neighborhood, Ribollita is the creation of chef-owner Kevin Quiet, who has won an intensely loyal following for both his Tuscan favorites (veal osso buco) and his own imaginative inventions (mussels with pistachio butter).

"and I just fell in love with the country — the cuisine and the culture. If it's going to be something you're going to cook everyday, you've got to enjoy it. I had the Mediterranean cooking background from Street & Co. Plus the site had been an Italian restaurant in what used to be Portland's Little Italy. Everything just kind of fell together."

41 Middle Street had also once been a barbershop, and rumor had it that men ran numbers out back, so Quiet didn't find himself sticking neatly to his space's tradition. Still, he does delight when diners come in and say, "Hey, I remember getting my hair cut in here."

As the name of the restaurant indicates — *ribollita* means "re-boiled" and refers to a robust Tuscan bread and vegetable soup — the menu's roots and the space's décor tend toward the northern Italian. Quiet regularly serves up Italian standards like fettuccine alfredo, veal osso buco, and linguine with shellfish in white sauce. "I grew

up in Maine, so I wanted people to have a familiar zone," he explains. But the bulk of his menu is quite imaginative, featuring culinary creations with a remarkable attention to flavors and textures. For example, Quiet pan sears his soft, handmade gnocchi so they have a bit of a crunch, then tosses them with salty, lean prosciutto and crisp green peas — a dish that one diner likes so much she's never convinced herself to order anything else, despite repeated visits to the restaurant. For a different entrée, Quiet wraps salmon in radicchio and serves it up with a pesto and roast pepper sauce. He occasionally sneaks dishes with non-Italian influences — like his deeply flavored tuna steak niçoise — onto the menu. And he has a real fondness for using nuts, prosciutto, and pancetta as accents in his meals. His steamed mussels are served with pistachio butter. His chicken breast saltimbocca is filled with prosciutto and sage.

Because his restaurant is relatively small — twelve tables, thirty-five to



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forty diners a night — Quiet hasn't shifted his menu a lot. Or his décor. "It's trattoria inspired, despite the white tablecloths. That's what I gravitate to when I'm in Italy. It makes me comfortable." There are posters of Italy on the wall, some Tuscan rooster pitchers on a shelf between two of the dining rooms. "The girls," he says, speaking of the waitstaff, "tease me because I don't like change. But I just like my core to be centered. I'm lucky I got off to a good start. I just kind of enjoy what it is." And he likes that his waitstaff has stayed with him through the years. "That's another thing that's Italian. It's kind of like a family in here."

ALL of this isn't to say that Quiet's is a staid kitchen. The chef offers different market risottos — experimenting with combinations like native corn, pancetta, and truffle butter, or radicchio and Gorgonzola — and he makes seasonal changes to other menu items, like his marvelous antipasto plate. Here, he "tries to hit all flavors of the palate." The appetizer is centered on a head of roasted garlic and supplemented with whatever Quiet has found during his weekly visit to the Portland farmers' market. On a recent night, the antipasto was crowded with salami, cheeses, spiced broccoli, Italian flat beans (those were from Snell Family Farm in Buxton, which grows much of the produce Quiet doesn't find at the farmers' market), fresh cucumbers, ceci (a chickpea salad with olive, spices, and vinegars), and crostini. A large homebaked polenta cracker was speared atop the entire plate. In another season, fresh fava beans might show up. Or a liver pâté. As for his specials, they're a standout among standouts, and include entrées like his polenta-crusted wolffish with prosciutto, mussels, and tomatoes, accompanied by Tuscan kale on mashed potatoes. The dish is vintage Quiet in that it uses, as any good chef these days uses, fresh local ingredients (the fish and the vegetables) and combines interesting textures and tastes. Wolffish have large jaws, and they eat a certain kind of mussel, which accounts for the fish's sweet flesh — making it tasty on its own and even better when combined with the very shellfish that it eats.

As for dessert, Quiet's same notions of combining tastes and textures are in play with a chocolate nut torte. Here, a creamy, flourless cake with a pistachio,



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hazelnut, and almond crust is served atop a light raspberry sauce. His vanilla flan is creamy and delicious. For people looking for something more traditional, there is a tiramisu.

Despite the innovation, Quiet and the (surprisingly) moderately priced Ribollita are both decidedly unpretentious. Which makes sense given that Quiet's culinary roots are . . . well, honey-glazed donuts. He grew up in Pittsfield, Maine, and his earliest memories are of the smells of Mom's Lunch, a doughnut shop that his grandmother owned on Route 100. "It was a Gulf gas station," he remembers, "with two pumps. On the inside counter, she'd have pies in the case and some of those lovely honey-glazed doughnuts.

"That started it," Quiet says, "and then my mom was a waitress. If they had a good night at her restaurant, they'd call me up, and I'd come over and vacuum, and that's how I got the bug." Later, he graduated to peeling potatoes and more regular work at the restaurant (a place called the Embers, which has since burnt down), before he went (in 1982) to the culinary program at South Portland's Southern Maine Technical College. "It's all I've ever done," Quiet admits. "And I still like it. That's the scary part."

At first, Quiet admits, the idea of being on Middle Street, just beyond the Old Port, was intimidating. "I liked the idea that Micucci [an old-fashioned Italian grocery-specialty store] was across the street. But I could sit out front and see tourists, and they would literally walk to the edge of where my space was, stand there, look, and do a U-turn back to the Old Port. But now people are going to India Street, to the coffee shop, and the Portland Observatory." A new life for the street, indeed.

Which doesn't mean that Quiet's forgotten his place's former life. "Are the walls talking to you yet?" asks the purveyor from Harbor Fish when he makes his deliveries. (No doubt if they did, they'd speak Italian.) And there's still the neighborhood's annual Italian Heritage festival. "It's stuff like that," Quiet says, "that really makes it fun for me."

—Debra Spark

Ribollita is located at 41 Middle Street in Portland. Open Tuesday through Saturday at 5 P.M. Kitchen closes at 10 P.M. Reservations recommended. 207-774-2972.