

Viva Havana!

Nuevo Latino flavors find a sophisticated home in a Bar Harbor hot spot

FEAST

by Candace Karu

Photography François Gagné

The unassuming exterior of Havana belies the excitement and activity that diners discover inside this innovative bistro. The small, gray-shingled building on Main Street in Bar Harbor, located just a few blocks from the village green, keeps the restaurant's secrets tucked safely inside. Only its festive trim, the color of cool guacamole, and the lush flower beds laden with vibrant orange and yellow blossoms hint at the fiesta going on inside every evening from May through December.

"The word 'Havana' has such romantic connotations," says owner Michael Boland, explaining how he arrived at the restaurant's name. "At first, we thought we might call it Cuzco after a town we visited in Peru, but that just didn't have the same appeal." Boland and his wife Deidre Swords are inveterate travelers with a particular affinity for Central and South America. They opened Havana ten years ago with the intention of integrating a New England sensibility with the best of Latin culture and cuisine. The successful blending of the sights, sounds, and especially flavors absorbed during their global travels is what brings diners back to Havana again and again.

Boland and Swords created the look of the restaurant with an eye toward simplicity and

sophistication. Adding richness and warmth, the walls were painted the color of smoked paprika to contrast with the sea-blue knee walls dividing the main dining room. The floors are worn, wide-planked pine, the chairs are rattan, and the sconces and pendant lights with black metal-grid shades add visual punctuation. The artwork reinforces the inherent romance of the Cuban-themed room with photographs by Maine artist Tom Judd.

Five years ago, with the demand for reservations regularly exceeding available seating, Boland and Swords converted an attached garage into a separate dining room to accommodate more customers. They also created a small space for al fresco dining with beautiful stonework by mason Jennifer Macomber of Bar Harbor.

Over the past decade, the owners have cultivated a staff that operates at an impressive level of efficiency. General manager Jena Dwyer makes every patron, even those without reservations waiting patiently for a table, feel pampered and well attended. She glides gracefully from bar to dining room and back, greeting regulars, taking drink orders, and orchestrating the service with a seamless precision.

Calm and unflappable, Mark "Duffy"





Festive green trim and colorful summer flowers (left) contrast with the weathered shingles of the converted house that is now Havana, a Bar Harbor bistro that combines fresh local flavors with international influences.

Between the main dining room and the recently converted garage there is plenty of outdoor dining (above, top). Anchored by a dry-laid fieldstone floor and topped with an awning entwined with sparkling party lights, the patio takes full advantage of warm summer nights.

The main dining room (above, bottom) is painted in hues of spicy paprika and deep cerulean. The space is divided by knee walls, raised platforms, and fabric banners, all of which lend a sense of intimacy to every table.



Chef Aaron Horvath



Bartender Mark "Duffy" Dyer

Dyer presides over the bar. With a shock of white hair pulled back in a ponytail, a snow-white beard, and a reserved demeanor, Dyer resembles nothing more than a character out of a Hemingway novel. His mojitos—a heady concoction of rum, lime juice, cane syrup, and muddled mint leaves—are legendary, and loyal customers have been known to drive miles out of their way for one of his signature Havana martinis. Dyer, who hosts a weekly jazz program on WERU radio in Blue Hill, compiles the musical selection that sets the tone for the restaurant. Even the most discerning listeners are impressed by Dyer's near encyclopedic knowledge of jazz and world music.

While every staff member is critical to Havana's success, the heart and soul of the restaurant lies squarely in the kitchen, where chef Aaron Horvath artistically interprets

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Boland and Swords's international vision. The chef, who studied design at Pratt Institute in New York, is fearless in his willingness to experiment in the kitchen. He has an unerring talent for combining unlikely flavors in dishes that delight even the most discriminating palates. On a recent night, Horvath prepared beef short ribs spiced with espresso and vanilla. The succulent meat, braised for hours in a dense, layered sauce, was served practically falling off the bone. The dish was tender and bold, sweet and savory—a complex study in contrasting flavors and textures.

Havana's signature preparation is lobster paella, a blend of local seafood, chicken, and smoky Spanish chorizo stewed with saffron risotto. Horvath's menu changes with the seasons (and on a whim), but patrons have

A sampling from Havana's kitchen and bar (clockwise from top left): A dish that rarely comes off the menu—lobster paella with chicken and chorizo; Mexican chocolate torte, a dense flourless cake topped with ancho whipped cream and dulce de leche; Duffy's incomparable mojito; a favorite appetizer—wild mushroom spring rolls with Japanese wheat noodles with a mirin soy reduction and roasted corn poblano aioli.

demanding that the lobster paella remain on the menu year after year. While Latin influences abound, so do diverse flavors from around the world. "Not everyone realizes what a melting pot South America is," says Boland. "Asian and European influences inform the cuisine down there, as well." What makes the cuisine at Havana unique is Horvath's ability to fuse these eclectic flavors with both skill and confidence.

Working with Boland, sommelier Victor Van Keuren has created the restaurant's impressive wine list, which has made *Wine Spectator's* Best of Award of Excellence for the past four years, one of only two Maine restaurants to be so honored. With a huge selection of wines from every corner of the globe, including an impressive array of reds from Spain, the list also features organic, low-sulfite, kosher, and even biodynamic wines.

While many acknowledge the value of local sustainability and global responsibility, Boland and Swords have taken their commitment to a new level. This winter they have rented a compound of several houses in Chiapas, Mexico. The couple has invited their entire staff to stay with them during their winter break. The offer, however, comes with one condition: anyone who visits them in Mexico must work for at least a week on the local Habitat for Humanity project. It is the owners' way of building greater trust and connection within their working family while promoting more active participation in the global community.

Dwyer, who has personal experience in international philanthropy, is organizing the project. She spent her honeymoon working at an orphanage in India, and has also spent vacations teaching field workers in Tanzania. "It just feels like the right thing to do," says Dwyer simply.

On this early fall evening, a new jazz discovery from Brazil is playing in the background, icy mojitos are sparkling in the candlelight, and the lights are lowered in the dining room as the murmur of happy, well-fed diners fills the air. All is well in Havana.

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