

Lustrous Pearl

Exploring one of Portland's most vibrant neighborhoods



By Leslie Forsberg

Colors reminiscent of lemon groves and a deep-into-summer sky draw me inside Sorella Luna, a ceramics and fine-arts shop where tables and shelves nearly overflow with platters, bowls and pitchers handcrafted by Italian artisans. The exuberant proliferation of hues and patterns seems to swirl around me while I attempt to choose my favorite design. As I consider sophisticated plates with geometric cobalt-and-taupe patterns and sunny pitchers painted with sassy, plump pomegranates, I quickly realize I won't be able to limit myself to a single piece.

The shop is one of the many outstanding attractions in Portland's Pearl District, where the laughter of children playing in a park mingles with the sound of diners at a sidewalk cafe; where distinctive art galleries jostle for attention alongside upscale boutiques; and where the lingering warmth of early fall days may seep into evenings, making a stroll to dinner and then the theater a joy.

Once a hard-working industrial and warehouse district and then a down-at-the-heels collection of crumbling late-19th and early-20th century buildings, the 120-block area obtained a new chic identity about a decade ago. Historic brick structures were repurposed for shops (more than 70), restaurants (nearly 50) and galleries (approximately 30). And new buildings, fashioned to fit the district's historic ambiance, have arisen gracefully alongside the older structures.

The name "Pearl District" dates back to the late 1990s, according to the Pearl District Business Association, when an art-gallery owner suggested that the gritty buildings were like crusty oyster shells, but the galleries and shops within were like pearls.

Today, proud residents—many of them living in one of the approximately 8,000 condo units created in new or renovated structures—stroll the Pearl's airy streets, greeting friends and strangers alike. Visitors come from throughout the world to shop the boutiques, enjoy gourmet food and participate in the First Thursday art-gallery walks, and happy shopkeepers regale customers with tales of how they came to do business in the Pearl.

"In 2007, when my friend, Laura, and I were visiting Assisi, Italy, we stopped at a local ceramics shop and bought a few pieces," says Giovanni Angello, owner of Sorella Luna. "As we said goodbye, the shopkeeper said casually, 'By the way, I'm selling my shop—it's 85,000 Euros.' I thought to myself, 'Great—but what would I do with an Italian ceramics shop?!'"

The idea was planted, however, and Angello and Laura visited Assisi multiple times over the next



The Pearl's Sorella Luna shop imports handcrafted ceramics from Italy. Left: The Portland Streetcar provides convenient transportation to, from and in the Pearl District.

year to research the logistics of starting their own shop there. In 2008, they opened a gallery in the Italian city, and Laura moved from the United States to run it.

When Angello, a second-generation Italian-American, was laid off from his engineering job last year, he made a bold move and also opened a shop, with his sister Mary Johnson, in the Pearl District. The shop sells dazzling ceramics, fanciful Venetian masks and locally blown glass, and Laura arranges for the Italian items to be shipped to them from manufacturers.

“I’m doing my dream,” Angello says with a gleam in his eye.

My own chance to dream of something wonderful comes when I step into the Pearl’s Oblation Papers



Far left: Pieces by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei are on display at the Museum of Contemporary Craft. Above and left: Oblation Papers and Press is known for its antique letterpresses and unique stationery.



and Press, a letterpress-printing and papermaking studio with rows of antique letterpresses in operation. Filled with unique cards and stationery, the store is presided over by Watercolors, a chirping parakeet.

“Do you want to make a wish?” asks Sigrid the clerk, with a smile, as I inquire about an unusual gift item called Wish Paper. “Of course!” I reply.

Sigrid guides me through the procedure: I write a wish on the 4-inch-square sheet and roll it into a tube, then place it gently on the fireproof-paper “launchpad,” and she lights it. It flames briefly, then the furled ash soars high into the air, hovering above my head before slowly drifting down, like a leaf. I won’t reveal what I wished for, but I hope the paper works.

A few blocks away, at The Dapper Frog—a high-style home-decor shop that opened in July and is filled with brilliantly colored glass art—my eye is caught by a chandelier with a circle of amber-colored salmon spiraling upward.

“We’re new in the Pearl, but we have three stores on the Oregon Coast, as well as one in Oregon wine country,” the clerk says. The abundance of ocean-

Cupcake Jones offers daily specials, such as the “cocktail-inspired” nonalcoholic cupcakes it bakes on Fridays, in flavors such as mimosa and Irish cream. Daily favorites include the Downtown Cupcake Brown.





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themed art reflects the influence of the coastal locations, and the splashing of water in fountains throughout the store enhance the sensation of being at a beach.

Next I visit the small-space, high-impact Museum of Contemporary Craft, at the edge of the Pearl District's North Park Blocks. The 4,500-square-foot museum, which opened in 1937, has a permanent collection of more than 1,000 items. It also regularly displays traveling exhibitions and sells works by local glassblowers, ceramists and jewelry makers.

I'm charmed by the clever works of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei that are displayed in the exhibit, "Dropping the Urn," which will be at the museum through October 30. Ai's *Ghost Gu* consists of two identical, 10 5/8-inch-tall, classic Chinese urns whose surfaces are a stark white, as if the painter hasn't begun his work yet. Curious, I peer inside one of them and am startled to see the blue-and-white pattern of a typical Yuan Dynasty urn, as if the vessel has been turned inside out.

The piece I like best, though, is Ai's untitled work that appears to be a 28-inch-tall pile of sunflower seeds, about 6 feet across, sitting in the middle of the floor. Upon closer inspection, I find that each seed is a perfectly shaped porcelain representation. I'm not sure what the message is, but I've read that the porcelain seeds evoke the years of famine under Chairman Mao, when sunflower seeds kept many people from starving to death.

The installation is beautiful yet sobering. It makes me grateful that I've always had enough to eat, and enhances my appreciation of the numerous food options in the Pearl District, where I can find sustenance ranging from Northwest seafood to farm-fresh produce to hold-you-over treats.

I'm delighted, for instance, to come across Cupcake Jones, with its fetching motto, "We have what you crave."

The shop offers pre-order tasting, and I try morsels of the margarita, mimosa and piña colada cupcake flavors. Yes, each one does taste like its name. And the best part—they're filled with pastry cream, creating the ideal cake-to-filling/frosting ratio, in my opinion.

"What's with the drink names?" I inquire.

"It's Friday—Happy Hour!" the perky Brunette behind the counter says. "There's no alcohol in them, but our 'cocktail' cupcakes are our Friday specialty."

That makes total sense in the Pearl, known for its jazzy, sophisticated wine and

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cocktail bars. The concept makes me smile.

Shortly before 6 p.m., I reconnect with my husband, Eric, who spent the day doing shopping of his own, and we walk over to Metrovino, a chic new Pearl restaurant that specializes in wine, with nearly 100 wines by the taste, glass or bottle. The sheer number and variety of wines available for tasting are unbelievable. How do they do this?

“Our Enomatic machine lets us sell in any amount,” says affable owner Todd Steele, who’s making the rounds in the dining room and stops by our table. “It re-seals the bottle after it’s been opened, keeping our wines fresh.”

The wine list includes “smackdowns”—taste-offs between rival countries or states, and I consider the Chardonnay Smackdown—Oregon versus California versus France—but ultimately decide to go local, with a flight of crisp aromatic wines from Oregon, including Matello Pinot Gris, Eyrie Pino Blanc and Cristom Viognier.

Our food choices start with a plankful of exquisite housemade charcuterie: a dozen complex appetizers ranging from a house-smoked maple-beef chorizo with quail egg to a robust pork pâté with Oregon morels and pistachios. It’s not surprising that the charcuterie planks seem to be flying out of the kitchen to each table.

We follow the appetizers with a platter of sautéed sugar-snap peas and mushrooms, accompanied by mint and freshly crafted ricotta. Our main entrée, wild Alaska salmon, arrives moist and rich, atop roasted eggplant and fresh green beans.

After dinner, we stroll to Portland Center Stage for musical entertainment. It’s housed in the Pearl’s most spectacular repurposed building, the 1891 Armory, a castlelike edifice with thick stone walls, turrets and parapets that was once home to the Oregon National Guard.

After an extensive renovation, completed in 2007, the Armory became the first performing-arts venue in the world to receive platinum LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification from the U.S. Green Building Council; platinum is the council’s highest designation.

Portland Center Stage has two Armory theaters, and we descend two flights to the intimate Elyn Bye Studio for a performance by Gavin Gregory and Susannah Mars—an engaging duo performing a program devoted to musicals. We listen, raptly, to delightful show tunes such as the passionate and wistful *Disneyland*, from the 1986 Broadway musical *Smile*, about a



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young girl with a challenging home life who longs to live in Disneyland. Mars tends to have a brassy edge, while Gregory's voice is smooth, with a rich timbre. Their quick-witted interplay is the best part, though.

"They were really great, weren't they?" Eric enthuses after the standing ovation.

As we file out, I'm astonished that there, standing at the exit, are the singers themselves, smiling broadly and greeting each individual with a hearty hand clasp as they thank us for attending.

I shouldn't be so amazed. All day, I've been noticing Portlanders' easygoing joie de vivre and friendliness—in every interaction. Moments after meeting Gregory and Mars, as we walk six blocks to the Pearl's Cool Moon, for an after-theater treat of handmade, all-natural ice cream, we see two young men walking toward the boisterous BridgePort Brewing Company Brewpub, which is housed in a cavernous historic warehouse. As if to underscore my musings about Portlanders, emblazoned on the black T-shirt of one of the fellows—in white, foot-high block letters—is, simply, "Hi."

At Cool Moon, I taste a number of flavors before settling on the iconic Oregon-hazelnut ice cream. Eric goes for the dark, intense, Mexican chocolate. We settle into Adirondack chairs in the balmy evening air and watch locals walking their dogs before they head in for the night.

It dawns on me that for many people, this dynamic dining/shopping/entertainment area is their "hometown." Those who live in the Pearl seem really happy to be here. They live in stylish condos within easy walking distance of great restaurants and shops. They enjoy beautiful open spaces with gardens, public art and water features. And they're close to downtown and other neighborhoods, with many attractions within strolling range, and many others accessible via public-transit options. They don't need a car, for instance, to visit the Portland Art Museum, the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, the Oregon Zoo or the Washington Park International Rose Test Garden.

We catch one of the city's quiet electric streetcars near Cool Moon and are deposited practically at the doorstep of our hotel, the Inn at Northrup Station, which is named for the nearby streetcar station, and located just off the beaten path, a few blocks beyond the west edge of the Pearl.

The inn is one of my favorite hotels, with spacious, kitchen-equipped suites, retro decor in '70s colors—orange, purple

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and lime green—free breakfast (with make-it-yourself waffles, along with hard-boiled eggs, yogurt and fruit), free parking and free streetcar passes.

In the morning, Eric and I eat a light breakfast before catching the streetcar. Eric's bound for his favorite Portland institution, Powell's City of Books, which takes up an entire city block in the Pearl (the bookstore even offers guided tours), and has more than a million new, used and rare titles on its shelves.

I'm eager to satisfy my pastry predilections. A baker myself, I'm on a lifelong quest to find the highest-quality baked treats, and morning is the best time to try the freshest pastries. I strike gold at the Pearl's tiny Nuvrei Pastries, where I consult the regulars before deciding on a cinnamon Danish. Buttery, with tender layers of baked dough enrobing a satisfying swirl of cinnamon, it's truly outstanding; I mentally add it to my pastry "life list."

Pastry mission accomplished, I embark on another pleasurable day of shopping. I try on a chic '20s cloche at the Bonnet boutique; watch giggling teens baking muffins as part of Sur La Table's culinary program; admire floral toddler togs at high-end children's clothier Hanna Andersson; and try on high-tech-fabric travel dresses at Patagonia, which is housed in a renovated 1895 brick warehouse now known as the Ecotrust Building. The building received a gold LEED rating after the renovation was completed in 2001.

The Pendleton Store—owned by a company that started in Oregon in 1863 and now sells its products across the globe—is my most rewarding stop. It's where I find a splendid gift for Eric's birthday. The store's wall of richly colored and patterned blankets—many with Native American designs—reminds me of my husband's love of sturdy wool bed coverings.

The blankets are made at the Pendleton Woolen Mills, one of the last operating textile mills in the nation. I select a National Park-series blanket celebrating Mount Rainier, and arrange to have it shipped home. Crimson, with bold yellow-and-green stripes instead of a literal depiction of the mountain, it is gorgeous, functional and imbued with history.

Eric and I meet for lunch at Fenouil, which focuses on French-inspired contemporary dishes. With tall glass windows, blond wood, elegant limestone columns and fireplaces, and outdoor seating adjacent to the Pearl's Jamison Square Park, it's a perfect spot for people-watching. Families rest on plush grass beneath willow



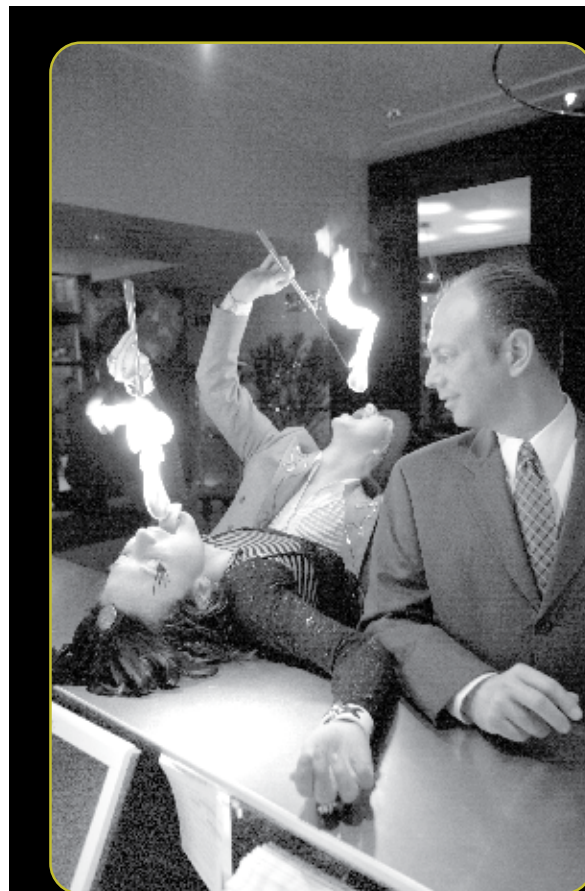
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trees as preschoolers splash in a cascade of water flowing over a series of stone steps at one end of a 40-foot-by-20-foot pool. To our surprise, the water recedes and then flows anew, to the shrieks of excited kids. “It simulates a tidal pool,” our waitress explains.

Over superb crabcakes and succulent pulled-pork sandwiches, Eric tells me about his morning at Powell’s, and I share my day’s discoveries (sans mention of the blanket). Then it strikes me how many pleasant surprises I’ve come across in this once-rough neighborhood. Just as the art-gallery owner who coined this district’s name envisioned, it has been much like finding a pearl inside an oyster. ■

Writer Leslie Forsberg lives in Seattle.

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