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Portland Is One Lucky Oyster!

The Pearl District, a well-established beauty mark on the face of Ms. P-town, reeks of glitz, glamour and all that other fluff. But embedded between multimillion-dollar condos and Kate Spade-busting boutiques are some very moderately priced eateries. Here are three restaurants that won't have you trading in your Beemer for a Buick.

Mercato

904 N.W. Couch St., 503-219-9966

This open space tucked in a quiet corner is a living and breathing oxymoron. It is both warm and inviting, yet spacious and airy. The décor is out of this world, with plastic dining room chairs straight from *The Jetsons*, yet the menu is surprisingly tame and somehow blasé in comparison to one's first impression. Don't get me wrong: The lunch service is outstanding, with fresh frittatas, salads and panini. But swing by for dinner and you'll be singing a different tune. Fortunately, the saving grace is the last taste of Mercato—the homemade gelato. Perhaps their pearl is in the pudding.

50 Plates

333 N.W. 13th Ave., 503-228-5050

Going to the Pearl to eat your way across America sound like your idea of a good time? If no, you should definitely reconsider. I don't know how they did it, but these folks (who also own JoPa Northwest Grill out in BFE) pulled out all the stops and have *really* made a name for themselves. Start off with the Carpetbagger's Stack (so dykey!), their beautiful medley of fried oysters and succulent medallions of beef filet, a gloriously glorified take on surf 'n' turf. Balance that with some of the city's most exquisite preparations of seafood, a delicious rendition of the classic fried chicken and waffles, and chicken-fennel sausage mac 'n' cheese. You've got it all: good ol' country-style home cooking in a clean, upscale and comfortable atmosphere. The only better way to top that is with an artfully prepared S'mores fondue and a tab that won't choke the butler.

Isabel's Cantina

330 N.W. 10th Ave., 503-222-4333

Generally speaking, restaurants that tout the words "pan" or "fusion" are an auto-out for me. Somehow, though, Isabel Cruz manages to capture the essence of, dare I say it, the flair of Latin flavors melding with Asian ingredients. Granted, her three San Diego restaurants are relatively closer to more sustainable sources of avocados, coconuts and mangoes, so this restaurant seems to surpass the warning signs of the carbon footprint that many Portlanders pride themselves on. But man, healthful eating and I-don't-care-where-this-ahi-came-from tuna tastes dee-lish! Be wowed by fresh salad wraps, big beautiful bowls of udon bounding with edamame, and glass walls that open to the inviting concrete outdoors. Maybe you could set aside your homegrown ethics and nosh on the fruits of the tropics; just remember that when you leave, you aren't in California anymore. **IC**

JENNY NGUYEN is not eating beef for a week to make up for the carbon footprint her new car is making. Rev her engine by writing to epiqueerean@comcast.net.