

WINTER SURVIVAL DESTINATIONS

FROM BEER TO BELLY DANCING, PORTLAND OFFERS UP APPEALING LAIRS

BY FRANCIS FLISIUK

➤ When crafting a “winter survival guide,” there are many things to consider, and partly because Maine’s harsh winter brings forth many challenges. What advice can I give you hardened Mainers who have probably endured countless blizzards and miles of icy highways? Should I offer up snow-shoveling advice, or rehashed hacks on how to clear up a frosted windshield? Or perhaps the best winter survival guide is one where I write out combative measures against pale skin, empty wallets, overeating and darkness-induced depression? No, I think I’ll leave you to battle those seasonal anxieties on your own. Instead, what I offer in this guide below are enjoyable reprieves from the basic elements. We’ve still got a couple months of chilly weather to endure, and as nice as curling up in a blanket, in front of Netflix with a steaming cup of cocoa is, it’s no way to spend an entire season. Besides, Portland just got named the coziest city in America, so there are plenty of places to escape the cold and warm up your bones. Let’s begin.

CHILLIN’ OUT

DOBRA TEAHOUSE ➤ Regardless of the weather, when I want to put life on pause, Dobra Tea, a Japanese styled tea room, comes to mind. With hundreds of selections from all over the world you might dizzy yourself choosing. The atmosphere in this beautiful tea room is the epitome of leisure and comfort. The music that plays has an ambient, tonal quality to it, perfect for easing you into that meditative, yerba-matte kind of high. There are plenty of comfortable chairs and dais’ to sit on, while you peruse the shop’s “tea journal.” It basically serves as the shop’s tea menu, but it also details the history, geography and qualities of the various loose-leaf teas for sale, either in bulk, or in a delicious hot beverage. Within its leather-bound pages, you’ll find more kinds of tea than you knew existed, sourced from exotic lands like China, India, Sri Lanka, Kenya and Turkey. There’s green, white and yellow, but also oolong, black, pu-er and tisanes. I recommend the pu-er. It’s

an uncommon kind of tea that’s known for being dark, earthy and more astringent. It comes in a brick, cake or nest form and you can get 10+ cups from one steeping. On a cold day, it’s the warming, complex taste adventure you need.

“Winter is time to slow down, and proper tea preparation calls for that,” said Ellen Kanner, a tea-master at Dobra. “Tea is always thought of as the drink that heals. It brings images of grandma and a warm blanket to mind. So coming to the tearoom on a quiet morning and relaxing in front of the fireplace with your favorite brew is certainly a cozy experience.”

International food is also available to pair with your tea. But the portions of baba ganoush, dahab, takadasan rice, miso soup and warm pitas, arrive on small dishes, so don’t come with a huge appetite.

DOBRA TEA is open from 10 am to 9 pm and is located at 89 Exchange St, Portland.

BRAMHALL PUB ➤ A rich, enjoyable, and secret drinking experience awaits those that trust their gut and descend the stairs to Bramhall Pub. Okay, maybe it’s not completely secret, like the speakeasies of the olden days, but Bramhall gets pretty close. It’s safe to say you won’t find many tourists there, or drunk 20-somethings discovering their buzz and shouting about it. And why’s that? Because Bramhall, and its candle-lit subterranean chambers, are tucked away and hardly advertised. When you descend the stairs into Bramhall, at

first it seems like you’re heading into a creepy basement.

“If you use Google maps to find Bramhall like I did, trust that your iPhone has not accidentally lead you to the gates of hell like I initially suspected; the entrance is a nondescript and completely unmarked stairway leading down into an underground abyss,” said Tony, a local from Portland. “It’s perfect for those who like speakeasies, but a nightmare for those who have a low tolerance for ambiguity.”

But parting the cloth reveals an aesthetically pleasing brick and stone lined chamber, where one can not only easily forget the winter’s cold, but the rest of the world in general. Further increasing the cozy factor is the dim lighting; the entire place is lit solely by a couple of sconces, candles and natural light peeking in from one stained glass window.

“It’s okay, you can come hide down here,” said one bartender. “Make sure you try our frito pie.”

Let’s talk about the food, because Bramhall isn’t just known for its Skyrim-esque vibe. The frito-pie is ridiculous. Tucked inside a Frito’s bag are layers of Southwestern styled guilty pleasures. There’s globs of melted cheese and chilli, pickled jalapenos and scallions, waiting to be scooped with a side of chips and led into your eager mouth.

Or how about trying Bramhall’s “Thai Rice Crispy Treat?” It’s a marshmallow bar that’s seasoned with bacon and peanut butter, for an appetizer that’s anything but average.

For those that don’t want to eat like they’re 13 years old, I recommend the mezze plate. It comes to you on a wooden board and offers up delicious portions of hummus, baba ganoush, whipped feta, tomato jam and olives. And toast, of course. Then there’s also salads, burgers (both beef and veggie), BLTs and Cuban sandwiches for the less culinarily adventurous.

If you want to warm up by candlelight, sip on some bourbon and eat a burger in a place that looks like a Harry Potter dungeon, Bramhall’s your place.

BRAMHALL is open from 4 pm to 1 am and is located at 767 Congress St, Portland.

