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75 Market Street
Suite 203
207-772-3373
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Hospitality consultant Christopher Papagni relaxes in his downtown loft apartment. He doesn't own a television, preferring instead to read, visit the museum, or stream a movie online.

Christopher Papagni knows a thing or two about taste—whether he's in the kitchen, at home, or using his culinary chops to help further elevate Portland's celebrated restaurant scene.

THE HOUSE SPECIAL

In front of me on a modern glass-and-steel coffee table, Christopher Papagni—former executive vice president at New York's International Culinary Center turned Portland restaurant/hospitality consultant—sets down a white side plate. Bright Cara Cara orange slices are neatly arranged in an overlapping arc, sweeping across the plate like a bold brushstroke. They're cut into moon-shapes, revealing pink grapefruit-colored flesh, and when I bite into the first wedge, it's crisp, juicy, and sweet. My host awaits my reaction. It's such a small thing: just a taste of an orange, but it contains so much style and consideration.

"So much of plating and styling is, I wouldn't say an art as much as a creative process," he says. "I think when you put food on a plate you not only have to think about it being beautiful, but it has to be easy enough to eat. Composition and color influence your taste. If something is really beautiful on the plate, it makes you smile

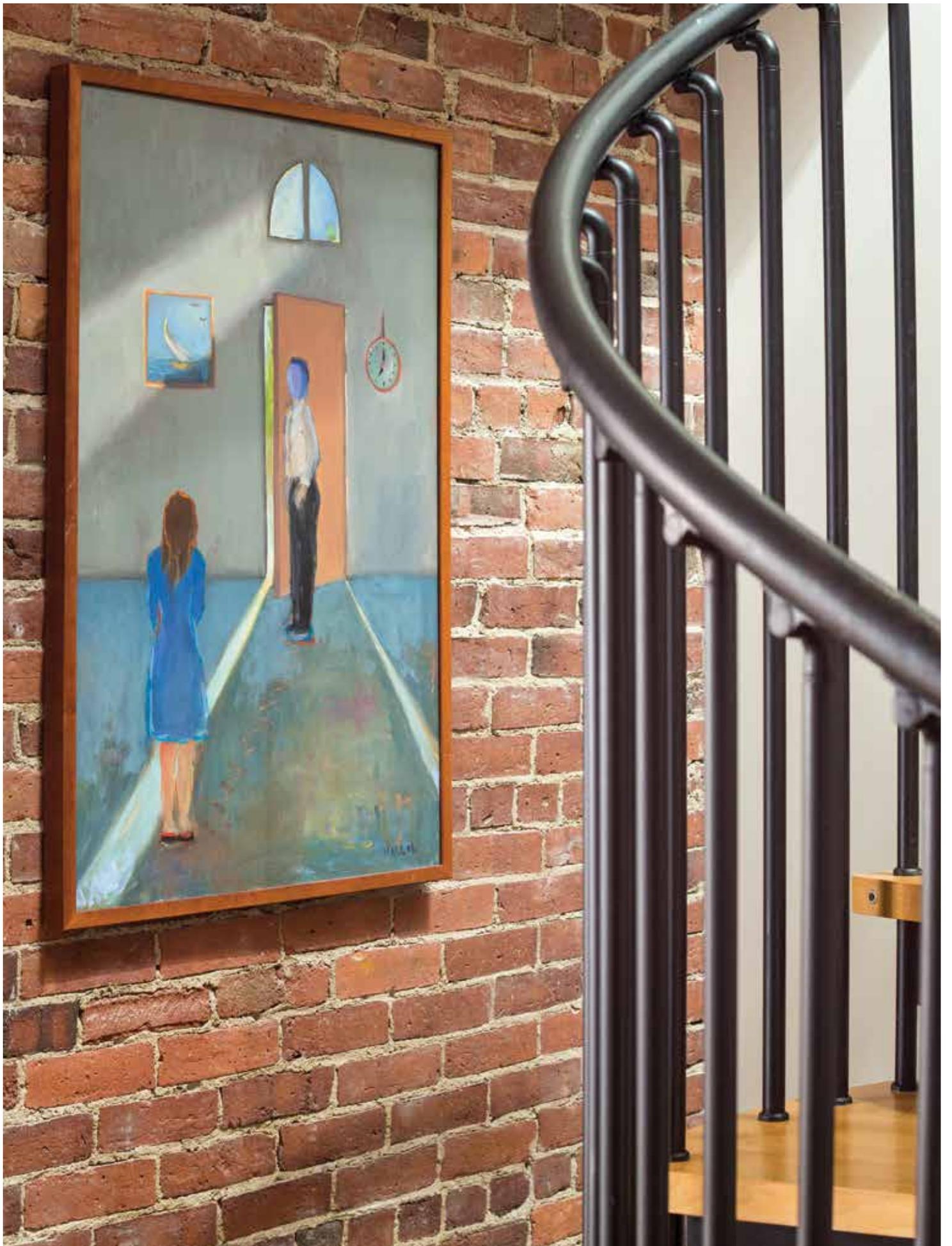
and appreciate it. It's not going to change the taste, but it enhances the experience."

A born and bred Brooklynite with a PhD in higher education administration, Papagni rose through the ranks at the International Culinary Center (formerly the French Culinary Institute) for 16 years before his move to Maine in 2013. Tall with a shaved head, Papagni is stylish and put together. He's wearing a navy button-down shirt, which upon first glance is an abstract print, but after closer inspection, I realize that it's in fact rows of tiny anchors and skulls and crossbones. It's clear that this is someone who pays attention to the details, who cares about presentation on multiple levels.

Sitting on a low-slung sofa in his exposed-brick loft apartment, my arrival announced a few minutes earlier by his Maltipoo Giorgio, I look around. To get here, I walked through the arched entrance of Congress Street's Queen Anne-style J.B. Brown Building, a structure listed on the

National Register of Historic Places. The exterior features gables and buttresses, but the fifth-floor, 1,900-square-foot loft is entirely of today, with art that pops against white walls and clean-lined furniture that's arranged around a modern fireplace. The space is open and light-filled, and because it's tucked in the back, it's removed from the hustle and bustle of the sidewalk below. "I love living downtown," says Papagni, who, despite his attraction to the neighborhood, is contemplating a move to the West End in order to downsize. "Every time I leave the building I think, 'Why would I live anywhere else?'"

After relocating to Portland, Papagni helped to launch Maine College of Art's first-ever culinary arts program, which is part of the continuing studies department. He developed place-based courses that have included mixology history at Portland Hunt and Alpine Club and microbrewing at Bunker Brewing Co., as well as classes at MECA, such as baking with Tara Smith



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from Standard Baking Co. He’s also begun working as a consultant, bringing his culinary clout and well-trained eye to places such as Vinland for a pop-up chef series and to the restaurant at the Nonantum Resort in Kennebunkport, where he helped with front-of-house training. When the longtime dining room manager at DiMillo’s on the Water left, Papagni recruited three top candidates (including the eventual hire) and helped improve front-of-house service. He also continues with his role at New York’s James Beard Foundation, serving as an emeritus member of the programming committee.

Through his work with the foundation and the school, Papagni has rubbed elbows with some of the world’s best chefs (browse his upstairs den, and you’ll find framed photos of him with Jacques Torres, Jacques Pépin, André Soltner, and Alain Saille), but it was the industry’s movement towards culinary stardom, a growing restaurateur-as-celebrity phenomenon, that was the impetus for his move.

“I grew up eating peasant food,” Papagni says. “My food background is very different

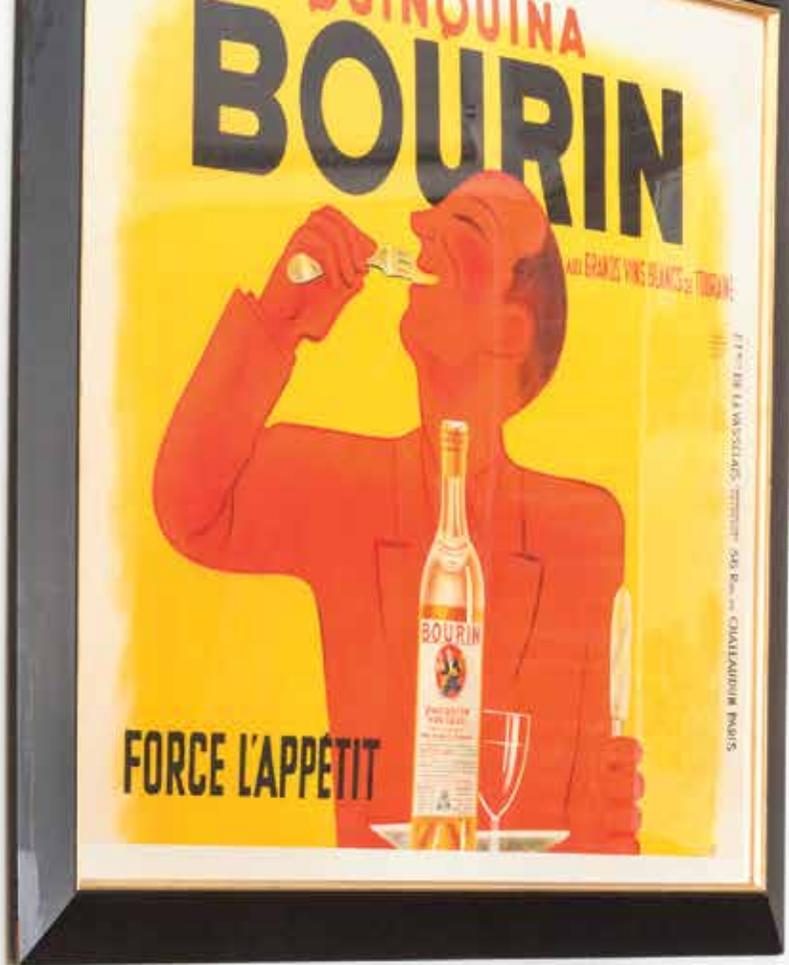


By adding a wall and translucent sliding door, Papagni created a cozy guest room out of a previously unused nook near the stairs.

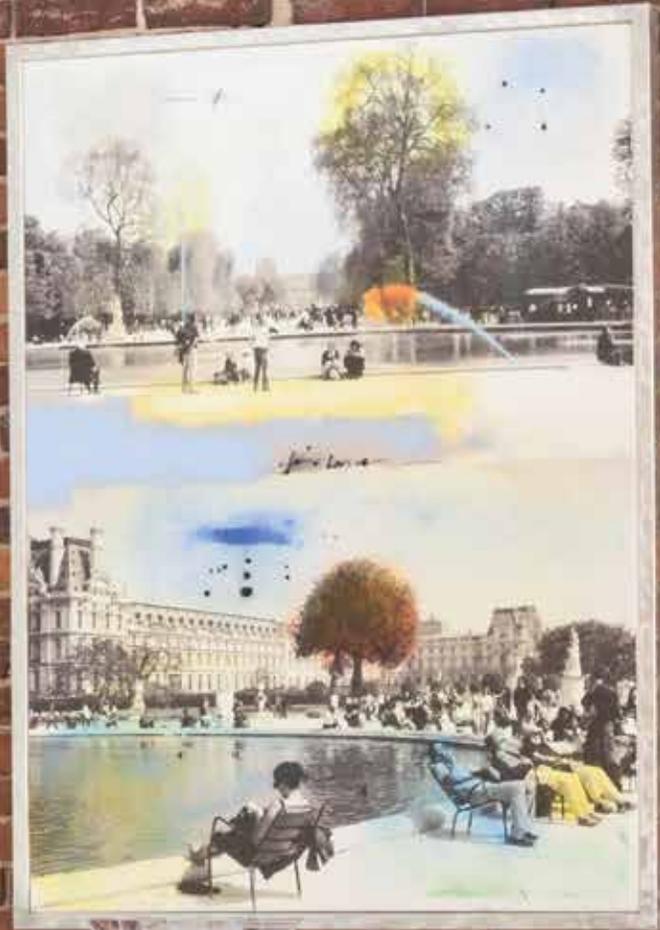
Opposite: A painting by Constanza Mallol hangs near the open spiral staircase.

than the world I was thrown into.” Papagni’s father was born in Italy, and after he arrived in Brooklyn in 1925, his first job was delivering large, heavy blocks of ice to tenement apartments. His father later opened up a luncheonette before going to work for the Carolina restaurant in Coney Island. “My father had a very keen sense of taste,” says Papagni. “He had this way of feeling food, the way he touched it, handled it. It always tasted so good—like it was in his hands. It was like alchemy, the mix of spices and olive oil.”

It’s at this point that Papagni invites me to take a look around his kitchen. Under a brick archway (one of several original architectural details that helped sell him on the space), there’s a 150-year-old cabinet that he rescued from a vintage store in Brooklyn. The color is indicative of its history: its washed green patina is a multitude of soft shades achieved through plant dyes. “Every piece in here has a story,” he says, as he swings open the wood door to reveal hand-cut, three-inch-thick planks.



A work by artist Isa D'Arleans hangs above a buffet that doubles as a bar in the dining area.





Dominating the kitchen is a large island and all the counter space that comes with it, with room to set up bowl after bowl of measured-out ingredients. (Papagni may have run an internationally acclaimed cooking school, but in New York, he still went home to prepare dinner in a tiny galley kitchen.) Here, he's able to easily host dinner parties, for which he might whip up a pizza or make paella. When I ask him if his culinary background has had any influence on the apartment's design, he considers it, then says, "I think having a sense of aesthetics translates into everything, whether it's the kind of diary I write in or the sheets that I sleep on, or how I plate my dinner."

As we continue our tour I see how this visual sense plays out in interior design. He's smartly transformed a small, unused nook under the stairs into a guest room by installing a tempered glass sliding barn door. The bath is a contrast in smooth white marble and centuries-old, rough-hewn

beams. Upstairs, his bed seems to float in the middle of a lofted space, positioned below skylights. Down half a level, there's a den that he's recently updated with blue-and-white pillows scored at Ikea, and his home office, which looks out onto Back Cove.

Moving from room to room, I notice that Papagni has used bold splashes of color throughout—and he's clearly not afraid to mix patterns. There's a burnt orange sofa with a houndstooth throw, colorful striped pillows, and deep-red, antique wool rugs. "Color has a way of awakening parts of you," he says, "And it's a reminder that you're alive. You have to be willing to take a risk."

His openness to possibility and progress, which helped him thrive in the culinary industry, now comes into play in his work as a consultant. "What I love about the world of hospitality and dining is how ever-changing it is. Most places realize they have to keep up with the times, and I thrive

on change. I like being a part of something where whatever you do on Wednesday is probably going to have to be revisited in two months. I love that food is always evolving."

One development that he's particularly pleased about is the food movement's trend towards simplicity. "Ten years ago, you would go to a restaurant and there were so many spices that you'd sit wondering what you tasted. These days, it's about using fewer ingredients to create something beautiful where the tastes are not muddled together. The chefs who appeal to me now are the ones using fewer ingredients and making something beautiful just by virtue of its simplicity. It's ironic because that's the way my father cooked. We had a garden in the back and there were always fresh vegetables and spices. He never really used a lot of ingredients, and that's the way his parents cooked, and their parents cooked. Now we're coming back to that. This new world of food is about fresh, simple, and local."



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Papagni received the handmade plate by Marité Acosta as a going-away gift when he moved to Maine. **Opposite from left:** Papagni at home in the kitchen. Paella with shrimp, scallops, chicken, clams, chorizo, and Bomba rice from Valencia, Spain.

We’ve returned to the living area and he sits down in a modern Barcelona chair—just the kind of timeless, less-is-more design approach he’s been describing. I help myself to a last piece of orange, and Papagni sums up why he’s been so happy here. “In Maine,”

he says, “People don’t cook to become celebrities. They cook here to feed people, and to put their best foot forward, and to create what they dreamed about creating in the kitchen. Here it feels more spiritual. It feels more like they care about the land, and

they care about food, and they care about the people. They are creating something that is only beautiful momentarily before it gets eaten, but what matters to them is that they can be proud of what they’re putting on that plate.” 🍷