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Society Notebook: Jewish and Irish heritage organizations co-host a kosher corned beef dinner

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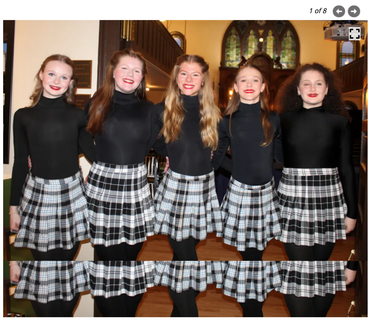

From left, Scotlyn Marlow, Anika Wark, Fiona Meyer, Lydia Mavodones and Emery Hells from Stillson School of Irish Dance. **Photo by Amy Paradysz**

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Two Portland cultural institutions — the Maine Jewish Museum and Maine Irish Heritage Center — celebrated their shared immigrant roots Sunday with a sold-out Shalom & Shamrocks kosher corned beef dinner and Jewish deli buffet.

"Our mission is to foster appreciation and understanding of people of all backgrounds, and that is exactly what we're doing tonight," said Dawn LaRochelle, executive director of Maine Jewish Museum. "This is a 120-year-old building that was an Irish apartment house before it was sold to Etz Chaim synagogue a century ago. Talk about synergistic."

Guests briefly visited the synagogue itself to hear a 1912 recording of Tin Pan Alley's song "If It Weren't for the Irish and the Jews," a lighthearted musical tribute to those two cultural groups. Then Mairead Stillson, a former lead dancer in "Lord of the Dance" on Broadway, introduced eight student dancers she trains at Maine Irish Heritage Center. The girls, ages 6 to 14, soon had dinner guests clapping along and hooting and hollering.

Next was the dinner itself, which included both Irish corned beef (dry-cured with salt, sugar and spices, and served in thick slices with cabbage and potatoes) and Jewish corned beef (cured in a brined solution with garlic and pickling spices, and served in strips with rye bread and sweet mustard).

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Making an Irish corned beef dinner kosher — which prohibits eating meat and dairy at the same time — was an intriguing challenge for LaRochelle, a former caterer, and program director Rebecca Moudachirou, a baker. With a team of volunteer assistants, they made the entire feast dairy-free, from the Irish soda bread to the Guinness Stout cupcakes.

The inspiration for "Shalom & Shamrocks" was a 2013 Smithsonian magazine article titled "Is corned beef really Irish?" Nearly a year ago, LaRochelle emailed the article to Maine Irish Heritage Center Executive Director Eric Brown with the subject line "Corned beef and collaboration!"

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"I paused for a second," Brown said. "But then I thought, 'This could really work.'"

Dinner guests included Eileen Eagan, who taught immigration history at the University of Southern Maine before she retired. "It's true that in Ireland, people didn't eat corned beef and cabbage," she said. "It was a middle-class Irish American tradition that started around the 1920s."

Maine Jewish Museum plans to host Shalom & Shamrocks again next year.

"Events like this are part of my vision for this museum to reach out to other communities in Portland," said board president Bob Hirshon. "Because we're a diverse city."

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