

A TASTE OF THE NEW AMERICA

WRITER **Martin Skegg**

PORTLAND, OREGON, IS THE LATEST CULINARY HOTSPOT IN THE STATES – A COMPELLING COMBINATION OF PLACE, TALENT AND A DOWN-TO-EARTH ATTITUDE

IN A SMALLISH room – 20 by 40 feet, with two long communal tables – two young female chefs calmly go about their business in an open kitchen. There’s no shouting or commotion, barely any hierarchy. Waiters casually linger at the counter, sharing a joke with the kitchen staff. It has the feel of a family gathering, a preparation for a Thanksgiving feast or a get together of friends. Except that the 18 people sitting patiently at the long tables have paid \$100 each to eat here, in what is one of the hottest restaurants in the United States right now.

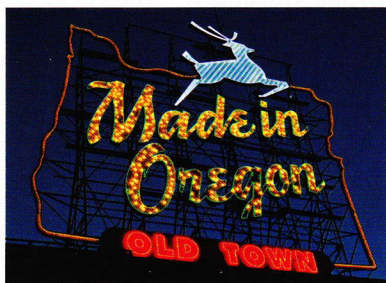
The restaurant, *Beast* (beastpdx.com), is in Portland, Oregon, and is one of the reasons the city has been called America’s newest food capital. Despite having a population of less than 600,000, the city has become the culinary rival of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, and has been described as “the capital of West Coast urban cool” by *The New York Times*. But the chefs and restaurateurs here, as I soon realise on a five-day quest to discover why Portland does food so well, don’t try to emulate the big cities. If anything, the rest of America is coming to Portland to find out how they do things.

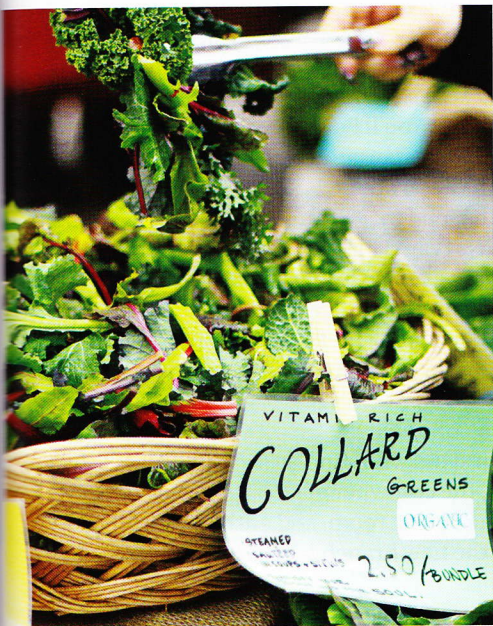
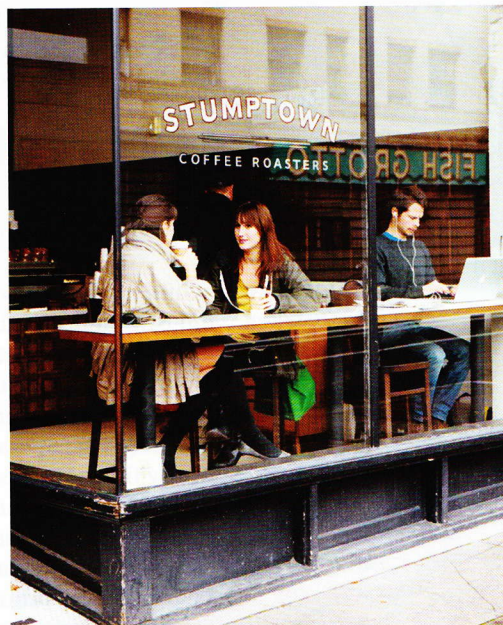
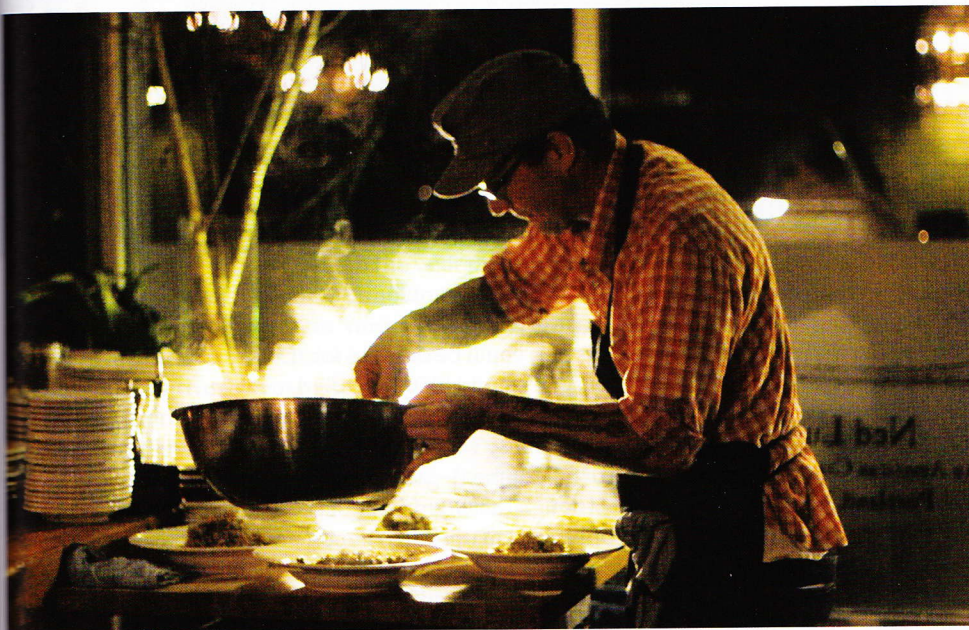
Beast seemed like a good place to start. I’d heard about the restaurant, the simplicity of it, how there is a single menu and one or two sittings a night, and the supreme quality of

chef Naomi Pomeroy’s cooking. As might be deduced from its name, *Beast* is known for its meat dishes, but I’d come for a seven-course vegetarian menu – it’s easy to impress with meat, after all, but what’s a chef to do with the likes of a carrot and a potato? In Pomeroy’s case, the answer is a lot. The menu was loaded with seasonal ingredients – morels, radishes, turnips, asparagus, ramps (a type of spring onion). The opener, a red lentil and rhubarb soup with fried fingerling potatoes, chive oil and sheep’s milk yogurt, was indicative of the meal to come – inventive, yet balanced,



LOCAL HEROES: Oregon’s vineyards (above) produce some world-class wines; (opposite page, clockwise from top left) locally picked strawberries; downtown Portland overlooked by Mount Hood; Stumptown Coffee Roasters; *Beast* restaurant; produce from a local farmers’ market; Ned Ludd’s Jason French







GETTING FRESH:
Beast restaurant
chef Naomi Pomeroy
(above, left) and her sous
chef Mika Paredes

skilful but not showy, and most importantly, offering mouthfuls of flavour.

“The menu structure comes from the underground dinners we used to do – they were called Family Supper,” says Pomeroy, referring to her days as an renegade chef operating out of her bungalow home. And while there are other practical restrictions – the size of the kitchen, lack of refrigeration, just two cooks – she had always wanted Beast to be intimate. “I like the rustic, home feeling of coming to Beast. I have an expectation that people feel like they’re in our homes when they come here.”

For Pomeroy, a native Oregonian and self-taught chef who spent her childhood watching her grandmother at the stove, cooking comes down to “realising that the best way I was going to make food people love and appreciate was for me to love and appreciate it myself”. Changing the menu, scouring the farmers’ market for ingredients, being influenced by the weather or a childhood memory all help to keep it exciting for her and her customers. The ingredients are the key: “That’s the one thing that knits everyone together [in the northwest]. The products here are amazing.”

It becomes a familiar refrain throughout my visit. “We are very proud of our ingredients,” says Allison Jones, contributing food and drink editor at *Portland Monthly* magazine. “In other places, if you decided to be completely local or organic you might go under because it would be too expensive or people would think it was hippy food. Here, if you don’t list the

farm on your menu or if someone says ‘where do those greens come from?’ and you don’t have an answer, you’ll be derided for it.” We’re sitting in Oregon’s first USDA-certified meat-curing facility, Olympic Provisions (olympicprovisions.com). It’s set in a cosy warehouse conversion, where I’d opted for a light meal – a remarkably tasty braised celery – though the Olympic staff seemed to think this was only a warm up, or perhaps a practical joke on my part, as the table is soon creaking under the weight of finocchiona, saucisson, liver mousse and a couple of pig parts I wasn’t able to identify with certainty.

The staff bring glasses of Gamay, an ideal accompaniment, they gleefully explain, to the fattiness of the charcuterie, while Jones enthuses about the city. “It’s really easy to be a visitor to this town,” she says. “You’ll be in walking distance of a handful of good restaurants. You don’t need a car. Just ask and walk around; see how beautiful it is.” We talk about the food cart culture – Portland has some 600 food carts (vans) offering just about every type of food (there’s even an English pasty cart), and the quality is extraordinarily high – the mind-boggling number of independent coffee houses that roast in shop, the microbreweries (there are more breweries here than any other US city), the young farmers supplying the produce, the artisan wine industry, the forest foragers who supply the restaurants...

Eli Cairo, the co-owner of Olympic Provisions, shows me the curing room, and enthusiastically talks about the new branch across town that also has

ALICIA ROSE

“There’s nothing set in front of us that says: this is how you cook”

Vitaly Paley

a smoking room. As expected, he praises the high quality local produce and the creativity and quality of food in the city. “There is no ego here,” says Cairo. “Everyone just wants to help make everyone’s businesses work.” Cairo himself helps out small, local pig farmers by turning their pork products into charcuterie for them to sell on, without charging for it.

This was beginning to sound a bit west coast hippy. Was this actually some sort of commune (albeit a meat-loving one)? It didn’t seem likely: Cairo and his business partners are undoubtedly here to turn a profit. It reminded me of Naomi Pomeroy’s response when I asked her whether she wanted to export *Beast* to the wider world: she candidly admitted that she didn’t know what the reaction would be like in a ‘real’ city. “The attitude here is a bit more DIY,” she explained. “There’s a creative spirit where people are willing to go and experience something, even if they don’t know what is going to happen.” Given the plaudits Pomeroy and *Beast* have received it was surprising – and refreshing – to hear, especially compared with the household-name chefs in Britain who loudly wave their ‘life-



changing’ manifestos, endlessly recycle themselves on TV, or advance plans for world domination according to an accountant’s schedule. So was this insouciant attitude a Portland thing?

I call on Vitaly Paley, one of the original ‘modernised dining’ chefs in Portland, for his insight. He tells of how, after working in Michelin-starred restaurants in France and living in New York City, he and his wife put their stuff in a truck in 1995 and told “the guy to drive slow until we figured out where we wanted to end up”. One of the reasons they stopped in Portland – then just a “lunch stop on the way from San Francisco to Seattle” – was the ingredients (of course). But he also relished the idea that “there are no traditions, there are no rules, there’s nothing set in front of us that says: this is how you cook.”

In the 1860s, the author and philosopher Henry David Thoreau wrote “I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe... we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure.” Perhaps Portland chefs still tap into that pioneering spirit and re-imagine cooking without the constraints of Europe or the east coast? Paley calls his food “northwest with a French influence”, after all. “This is somewhere where the rat race is not so intense,” he says, “somewhere you could be free to create.” His restaurant, Paley’s Place (paleysplace.net), is testament to that freedom – on my visit there’s an intriguing menu based around the humble radish (it’s even in the sorbet).

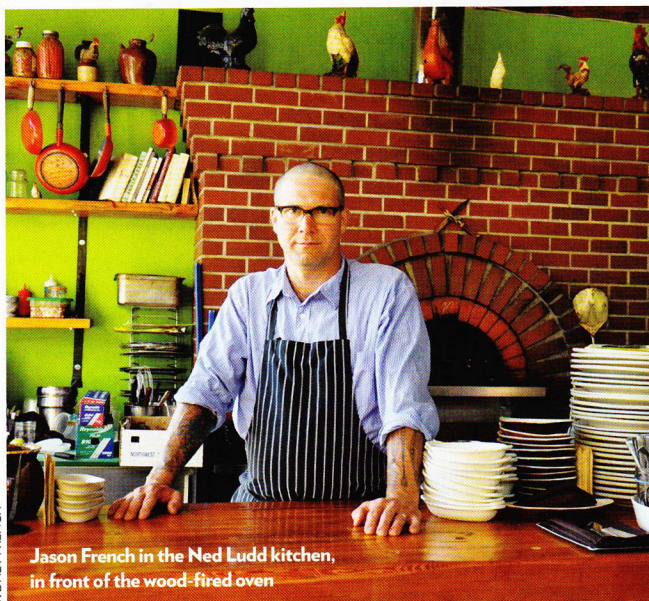
I ponder on this as I go for the final meal of my journey at Ned Ludd (nedluddpdx.com), another acclaimed restaurant without a tablecloth or amuse bouche in sight. The chef, Jason French, is known for his ‘Portland European’ food and for the fact that all the hot dishes are cooked in a single wood-fired oven, inherited when he took on the site lease. Is there something special about Portland? “You come out west for a reason,” he says, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. “The west coast attitude is looser

MENU MASTERS:

Paley’s Place (above) is one of the original restaurants to combine imaginative cooking with exceptional local ingredients. Below: Eli Cairo, co-owner of the award-winning restaurant-charcuterie *Olympic Provisions*, at a Portland farmers’ market



ALLISON JONES



Jason French in the Ned Ludd kitchen, in front of the wood-fired oven

CYDNEY FRENCH

“The west coast attitude is looser”

Jason French

and less cutthroat than the east. The feeling here is that people are genuinely down to earth and committed.” French is from Maine in the east, but he looks every bit a Portlander with his check shirt and tattoos (he sports a collection up his arms, including drawings of antique looking kitchen implements).

“There’s a culture that exists here that the larger American culture wants,” he says, and explains how movements such as farm-to-table and living green, which emphasise sustainability, local produce and seasonal ingredients, have been happening in Portland for some time. Whereas cooking for the last 30 years has been about chefs having an idea for a dish and finding the ingredients to make it happen, French sees it now as being more about cooking from a place. “Does it taste like the place?” is the question he asks of his cooking.

Ned Ludd certainly feels rooted in place. Homely and relaxed it has the same casual vibe found throughout Portland, though French insists on top-class service. The cooking relies

on seasonal produce from around 15 local farms, the dishes created from what is available on any given week. The menu, like a traditional country restaurant in France, simply lists the ingredients, which adds to the sense of discovery as you don’t know how they are cooked or put together. The results are startling in their variety of tastes, textures and presentation. Blue mussels, green garlic,

nettles, crusty bread, Berkshire pork, young turnips. It speaks of the Pacific northwest, of lush forests, elegant rivers, snow-capped mountains and dramatic coasts. Watching the guy systematically loading the old pizza oven, like he’s feeding a steam engine, I can’t help but wonder what magic is taking place behind the scenes to create dishes that somehow combine opulence and simplicity.

Before I leave, French shows me a patch of land behind the restaurant. He’s involved in turning the space into a community garden, with a water catcher to irrigate the vegetables for use in Ned Ludd and beehives for making honey. As he talks I realise that French, like many of the other Portlanders I have met, is a geek. A cool geek, for sure, but he’s obsessive about what he does, the food he creates, and the particular way in which he lives. And what makes it ‘Portland’ is that he’s dedicated to this lifestyle without ever being evangelical about it. There are plenty of others like him around town in all walks of life, which is what gives the city its vibrant but at the same time, laid-back feel. French has a simpler explanation: “Portland is really just a bunch of people doing what they want to do without others telling them they can’t do it.” And then he adds, “It’s real people doing real stuff. It doesn’t feel like America.” ■

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PRACTICALITIES



GETTING THERE

American Airlines, British Airways and Air Canada all run regular services from London through various connections, the quickest tending to be through Vancouver and Seattle; prices start from around £560 return.

ACCOMMODATION

The Nines, in the centre of downtown Portland, is glitzy and glamour atop the old Meier & Frank department store building; rooms from around \$220 a night; thenines.com.

Hotel Modera offers 174 rooms of modernist luxury and a relaxing courtyard with fire pits; rooms from around \$125 a night; hotelmodera.com.

INFORMATION

For more information on Portland and Oregon, visit traveloregon.com.