

Gourmet

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GOOD LIVING TRAVEL

BY JESSICA MAXWELL



False modesty is not on the menu at Naomi Pomeroy's *Beast*, but you will find heavenly hash and a veal potpie that's off-the-charts wonderful.

PORTLAND, OREGON

A CITY PUTS ON ITS GAME FACE

Jack Yoss peered through a mobile of housemade salamis. He looked like Jack Black doing Jack Nicholson in a foodie redo of *The Shining*. He turned out, however, to be much less forbidding—more reminiscent, perhaps, of the Jack one would associate with a beanstalk. “Tomorrow morning, Daniel Mondok from Sel Gris is bringing me some organic arugula from his own garden,” the executive chef of Ten-01 said. “Chefs here trade products

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and farm information. We eat at each other's restaurants and send our own customers there. There's just no ego, which is amazing given the level of talent." He grinned. "I think I'll give Mondok some of this smoking-hot *soppressata*."

Smoking-hot like Portland's food scene these days, thanks to the luminous work of an ever-expanding pack of sparky young chefs. Some, like Yoss, were headhunted by high-minded corporately owned houses that give their chefs full artistic authority. Others, like Mondok, teamed up with backers, or put the money together themselves, to open little bistros all over town, with new places cropping up every month. They all know one another, and their cooking résumés are so incestuous that the *Willamette Week*, a local newspaper, felt obliged to publish a six-degrees-of-separation genealogy chart of Portland chefs last year.

Most hail from elsewhere, coming to Portland for its communal spirit—and its ingredients, which flood in fresh each season from the bookend fecundities of the Willamette Valley and the Pacific Ocean. There's a very real sense that Portland today is to the culinary arts what Paris was to the visual arts a hundred years ago.

A few trends predominate. A love of meat, for instance, notably pig (every part of it): pork-belly starters, pickled pigs' ears, and bacon everywhere, even candied in desserts. And Portland seems to be inventing a kind of Euro-Pacific farm cooking that Grandma would have loved: full-cream spoon breads, flaky brioches, lard piecrusts, gravy galore, and lots and lots of thick-crust fried chicken. There are also local spirits: Newcomer House Spirits Distillery uses regional juniper to distill outstanding small-batch Dutch-style gin. Veteran Clear Creek Distillery turns out fabulous *eaux-de-vie*, including one called Douglas Fir. And many restaurants are now making their own bitters. All of this is bracketed by a clutch of passionate in-city purveyors, notably Ken's Artisan Bakery and Steve's Cheese, a showcase for local artisanal cheeses such as Willamette Valley Cheese Company's Farmstead Gouda and Rogue Creamery's Echo Mountain blue.

Here, then, is a guide to the hottest restaurants in Portland, a few formal, one demandingly so, the rest made for the easy jeans-and-fleece aesthetic of everyday life in the Northwest.

The moment I stepped inside *Ten-01*, the lively corner anchor of the city's chic Pearl District, heady aromas beguiled my nose. "That's Jack's chorizo and some peppers," noted lauded sommelier Erica Landon, "for his roasted scallops." The dish arrived: three sweet sea scallops on a hillock of fennel purée crowned by rough-cut chorizo, asparagus, South African peppadew peppers, and Marcona almonds haloed in hot-orange smoked-paprika oil. A study in subtle complexity and one of the most delicious, and prettiest, things I've eaten, ever. And to think it was on *Ten-01*'s three-course \$15 "Power Lunch" menu, surely one of the best deals in town.

Yoss, 33, has spent half his life in the restaurant industry, starting as a 15-year-old dishwasher in Las Vegas, after spending his early childhood in Greece and Venezuela. "My dad worked on oil rigs," he explained. His dad was also his inspiration. "He used to get up at the crack of dawn and have an eight-course breakfast ready for my brother and sister and me. And his two-day chili was the best."

Yoss had cooked his way through Las Vegas casinos and San Francisco's dotcom days, including seven years at *Postrio*, when he was recruited as executive chef at the *W Hotel* in Los Angeles. Two years later, he took over *Ten-01*. "Oregon has it all," he said. "The wine, the fish, the meats, the chicken, the finest pork in the world, the produce—and your farmers are all right here." Yoss's beets, for instance, come from Gene Thiel's farm. "He comes by with these gnarly-looking things that can weigh ten pounds. I'm used to perfect California baby beets, but these have the sweetest, most amazing beet flavor I've ever tasted." His elegantly robust, piñata-bright dishes had a dedicated following within a matter of weeks.

"I won a scholarship for calligraphy out of high school," offered chef Daniel Mondok. It's a clue to the exquisite compositions that play to SRO audiences at *Sel Gris*, his one-room restaurant on Portland's Eastside. Like Yoss, Mondok started out as a 15-year-old dishwasher. "Being from Eureka, California, I could have been doing drugs, but I was cooking instead." He cooked

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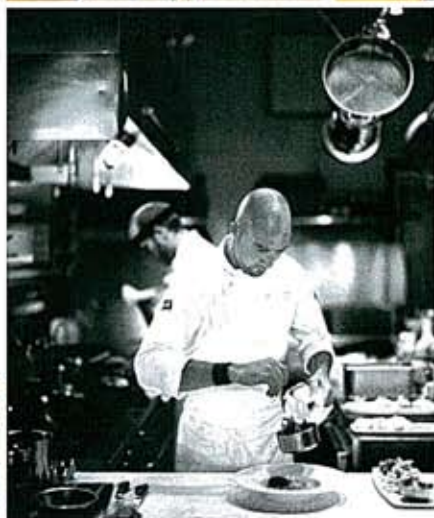
his way around Northern California, including a short stop at *The French Laundry* and a longer layover at San Francisco's *Elizabeth Daniel*. Then an Oregon vacation showed him Portland's rich pantry, and in 2003 Mondok began working at *The Heathman*, a downtown icon, under executive chef Philippe Boulot, one of the city's fine-dining maestros. Four years later, in September 2007, at age 36, the sweetly intense three-time *Iron Chef Oregon* winner opened *Sel Gris* with co-owners Ron and Joan Dumas, who shared his vision of a comfortable high-end restaurant without high-end prices.

"I call my culinary concept American contemporary," Mondok said, "with a French emphasis and Northwest accents. That lets me go anywhere I want." To melt-in-your-mouth pork and beans made with "all-day-braised" Carlton Farms pork cheeks and cannellini beans, for instance. Or sumptuous sweet-and-crisp pan-roasted foie gras served on top of a mini-Monte Cristo sandwich, painterly squiggles of Riesling syrup and meadowfoam honey, and a cap of ultrafresh herbs from Mondok's home garden.

"I played golf with Gabriel Rucker from *Le Pigeon* last week, and he said, 'Dude, I want some more greens for my burgers!' I'm all for sharing the wealth, and that's the best thing about Portland chefs—we're all here to help each other succeed."

When I recounted the story to Rucker, he flashed a dimpled grin. Clearly, the exchange of ingredients leads to some happy innovations. "Whatever goes through my head gets put on a plate and into your mouth. Asian stuff. Spanish salad. We're French-ish!" the 27-year-old Napa native hooted. "My only concept is if you have fun cooking it, it tastes better!"

It certainly does at Rucker's *Le Pigeon*. The place isn't arty. The china doesn't match. The menu is laundry-list terse, as in a dish called "Cod, Mackerel, Potato, Leek." Except for the shelves of beautiful put-up vegetables (a passion of Rucker's), it's



At Sel Gris, pork and beans means pigs' cheeks with creamy cannellini; light-filled luxe at Lucier; Gabriel Rucker, of Le Pigeon, is all about gutsy, unadorned flavors; the Willamette River winds through both the city and the cuisine of Portland; Daniel Mondok, of Sel Gris, started out as a 15-year-old dishwasher; in the belly—er, the kitchen—of Beast, quail eggs (along with steak tartare) on toast add glamour to charcuterie.

very much all-guy, and so are the well-muscled dishes that fly unadorned out of the open kitchen. "I love tongue," Rucker averred, and it shows in his superlative "Beef Tongue, Horseradish, Potato, Arugula." He also loves venison in the fall, serving it grilled with bone marrow and caramelized-onion tarts, and fresh- and pickled-pear salad with lamb-belly croutons he confits overnight and then deep-fries "so they melt in your mouth." So do his foie gras profiteroles and his dessert corn bread with shards of bacon and apricot. The fact that *The Oregonian* named Le Pigeon Portland's 2008 Restaurant of the Year came as no surprise, but the fact that two restaurants won the same accolade did: The honor was shared by Naomi Pomeroy, the 34-year-old chef and co-owner of *Beast*, another one-room wonder located 50 blocks to the north.

Cathedral light sweeps down onto Pomeroy and her all-female brigade. *Beast's* busy Sunday brunch is a prix-fixe menu that reflects both Pomeroy's grandparents' Louisiana roots (delicate French toast bread pudding with **CONTINUED ON PAGE 44**

ADDRESS BOOK

THE NEW GUARD

BEAST 5425 N.E. 30th Ave. (503-841-6968; beastpdx.com).
THE COUNTRY CAT DINNERHOUSE & BAR 7937 S.E. Stark St. (503-408-1414; thecountrycat.net). **LE PIGEON** 738 E. Burnside St. (503-546-8796; lepigeon.com). **LOVELY HULA HANDS** 4057 N. Mississippi Ave. (503-445-9910; lovelyhulahands.com). **LUCIER** 1910 S.W. River Dr. (503-222-7300; lucier-portland.com). **POK POK** 3226 S.E. Division St. (503-232-1387; pokpokpdx.com). **SCREEN DOOR** 2337 E. Burnside St. (503-542-0880; screendoorrestaurant.com). **SEL GRIS** 1852 S.E. Hawthorne St. (503-517-7770; selgris.net). **TEN-01** 1001 N.W. Couch St. (503-226-3463; ten-01.com). **TORO BRAVO** 120 N.E. Russell St. (503-281-4464; torobravopdx.com).

NOT-TO-BE-MISSED FAVORITES

BLUE HOUR 250 N.W. 13th Ave. (503-226-3394; bluehouronline.com). **THE HEATHMAN RESTAURANT & BAR** The Heathman Hotel, 1001 S.W. Broadway (503-790-7752; heathmanrestaurantandbar.com). **HIGGINS** 1239 S.W. Broadway (503-222-9070; higgins.ypguides.net). **PALEY'S PLACE** 1204 N.W. 21st Ave. (503-243-2403; paleysplace.net). **SAUCEBOX** 214 S.W. Broadway (503-241-3393; saucebox.com).

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41 maple bourbon hard sauce), as well as her own Oregon upbringing (heavenly pork-cheek hash with porcini and morels).

"My mom was a hippie and we were poor, but she stayed home with me and cooked three meals a day from scratch. All of my childhood memories are food-based." Pomeroy's cooking, she will tell you, is French-influenced and classical. "I'm going for integrity and purity—for dinner, it might be just a veal potpie. All I really want to do is make food that I want to eat and have people feel what I want them to feel. There's nothing in the world better than looking out and seeing my customers' eyes roll back in their heads and thinking to myself: 'I did it!'"

A dozen blocks or so east of Le Pigeon, on an otherwise unremarkable corner, a congenial crowd loiters outside **Screen Door**, waiting for tables—not to mention crawfish cakes, fried green tomatoes, shrimp and grits, and classic southern desserts, including a perfect coconut cake. Owners Nicole and David Mouton are from Louisiana, and the tantalizing aroma of brown roux spices up this big, fun, noisy room.

In the up-and-coming neighborhood called Montavilla, **The Country Cat Dinnerhouse & Bar** adds Northwest glamour to heartland cooking. Here, midwestern transplant Adam Sappington and his wife, Jackie, do the impossible: They make light of old-time American farm food.

At brunch, for instance, there are extraordinarily good cinnamon rolls and a pecan spoon bread that practically levitates off the plate—all made by Jackie, the house pastry chef. And then there are the meats, including Adam's mortadella stippled with pistachios; "the protobologna," he called it. And the übercrisp-skinned, succulent, skillet-fried chicken that his German great-grandmother used to make for inmates at the Vienna, Missouri, jail. The pièce de résistance, though, is a sectional ode to Portland's pig love that includes tender rolled belly, smoked shoulder, and a brined chop, all prepared from an organically raised whole hog delivered straight from Sweet Briar Farms each week.

The smoked meats are also fantastic at John Gorham's hopping house of tapas, **Toro Bravo**. While his wife, Courtney Wilson-Gorham, graciously works the front

of the house, this barrel-chested former resident of the East Coast is busy making the most wondrous smoked bacon, smoked coppa steak, and smoked pork shoulder that show up all over the menu. Go crazy. Order everything. Just be sure to order something with the edgy-creamy *romesco* and to finish the meal with the lemon-scented olive-oil cake.

For a lighter touch, head north about 20 blocks to Lovely Hula Hands, in the budding Mississippi neighborhood. With feminine focus, sister-owners Sarah and Jane Minnick have redone this former flower shop in a pretty, retro-Anthropologie style, and their straight-ahead menu, manned by Chez Panisse alum Troy MacLarty, "nails it every time," in Daniel Mondok's opinion. Raves for the salads, especially baby romaine with avocado, almonds, and spot-on lemon vinaigrette. Raves for the Carlton Farms pork loin with mustard sauce. And the natural chuck burger with bacon, Cheddar, caramelized onions, and aioli on a brioche bun just may be the very best in town.

Portland's liveliest pan-Asian food scene is at **Pok Pok** and its Whiskey Soda Lounge, located about ten blocks east of Sel Gris. The somewhat rough-edged restaurant was *The Oregonian's* 2007 Restaurant of the Year, and with very good reason. Asia-phile chef-owner Andy Ricker skillfully re-creates Southeast Asian street food with American ingredients. "Order the Vietnamese fish-sauce wings," Jack Yoss commanded. "Sweet, sour, spicy—they've got every kind of balance. They're delicious."

Liveliness gives way to luxe at **Lucier**, the South Waterfront's dashing new duke of haute dining. Never has the city seen such grandeur. Even a river runs through it—a charming stream skirts the dining room's perimeter in honor of its grand view of the Willamette. Happily, too, dinner at Lucier won't break the bank. The \$75 three-course menu more than honors chef Pascal Chureau's artful Franco-Northwest cuisine, and you could easily spend that much at Le Pigeon or Sel Gris. Nonetheless, some gobsmacked locals don't quite know what to make of Lucier. But the chefs do. "We finally have a four-star restaurant," said Gabriel Rucker. "I now have a reason to put on my suit and go out to dinner and eat caviar!" Portland, he declared, has arrived. ■