

Back of the House: Chef David Seigel



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Back of the House is a new feature here in the Food & Wine section of ThePortlander, where I introduce to you the Chefs of Portland. It's a great way to get to know the guys in the back of the house, whom you rarely see. When some picture Chefs, they think Gordon Ramsey with all the yelling at screaming that goes with it. I can tell you from experience, that this isn't always the case. So I figured, we need to poke our heads to the kitchens of Portland, a peek behind the magic curtain if you will.

Our first Chef on the block is Chef David Seigel of [Belly Timber](#), a restaurant that's somewhat new on the scene in Portland, well if you count a year old – “new”. The restaurant is located inside a beautiful remodeled Victorian house, on Hawthorn. According to Belly Timber's website, Belly Timber is Victorian slang for “food of all sorts”. And the man that makes that ‘food of all sorts’ agreed (after my constant badgering, and near restraining order) to answer a few questions.

But first who is David Seigel?, and where did he come from?

While not a native Portlander, he's been in our beloved Stumptown for four years. He's worked at Nostrana, Merriwethers where he was the Sous Chef and now Executive Chef of Belly Timber. Also, Seigel along with the help of friends founded the “East Side Dining Club” which was the occasional supper club who put

on multi-course dinners with wine pairings.

Before heading out west, Chef Seigel worked for 5 years in Boston, including studying Hospitality Administration at Boston University. All the while working in restaurants, both in the front of the house and in the back. So now that I've got you caught up to speed, how about we hear from the man himself.

Single/Married/Divorced?

I am decidedly single.

What did you want to be when you were when you grew up?

I had never chosen one profession to fixate on, however cooking and restaurants became a focus late in high school as I began working within the industry. One thing I've always known for sure is that my ultimate goal is to be self employed. I'm not there yet, but the experience I've received in Portland alone has brought me much closer.

What was your first job ever in food? What did you learn?

My first job in the industry was a gourmet food/coffee shop in Greenwich, CT. We sold prepared high end food sort of like what you might find at Pasta Works or New Season, but making use of the most expensive ingredients money could buy. A team of professional chefs was in the back cooking it all and the owner was celebrity of sorts, having come up in NYC and been exec chef at a very well known Manhattan restaurant. I worked there with one of my best friends who I still am in touch with today, and we still laugh about that job all the time. I learned too many things to list here. It was an outstanding introduction to working with food, dealing with guests, making coffee drinks, understanding cash flow and food cost, taking ownership of a position, managing egos and so much more. It didn't however, prepare me for cooking on a line or the fast pace of a traditional restaurant. That came later!

In the August edition of Ultimate Northwest magazine they broke down the 10 best restaurant's in Portland by neighborhood. In the southeast Belly Timber was named one of the 10 best in the area, sharing the page with the likes of Bunk, Noble Rot and Screen Door. BT has only been around for a year now, what would you attribute to the success and press you and your establishment have been receiving?

The success of Belly Timber can be attributed to many things, but all of them will lead back to one central theme: hard work. We have an incredibly small and tight knit staff here. Each and every one of them goes above and beyond what would be expected of them at most other jobs of the same sort. A special work ethic and dedication to doing an outstanding job has kept us all going and translated to memorable dining experiences for our guests.

You're a very meat and pork-centric Chef (evidence not only on the menu, but with your "Go Meat" shirt), yet recently you hosted a all Vegan dinner – what spurred you to go off the grid of everything meaty and put on this vegan feast?

The new found attention to veg-friendly dishes is something I've had to explain a few times recently and will no doubt have to many more times in the near future. Portland dining is very meat-centric, and for a good reason: it's awesome! The emphasis on traditional methods, local products and the DIY spirit of this city

has been inspiring and opened up possibilities for me that I never knew existed. I feel that I may have gotten too caught up in the meaty spirit, though.

My menus (which change weekly) are small and lacked a core balance. I've been experimenting with creating dishes that don't necessarily have protein as an anchor, but rely on the harmony of various ingredients. It's a challenge and so far I've really enjoyed it. From a business perspective, I've realized that most restaurants in Portland that are not exclusively vegetarian tend to only have one or two meat free options. We often have groups come in to dine with one or two non meat eaters. The majority are happy, but few don't have much to choose from. I want everyone to be happy and furthermore I want non-meat eaters to trust that they can make plans to eat at Belly Timber with their meat eating friends without worry they will be stuck with one uninspired dish to choose from. As far as the vegan thing goes, I figured that if I'm going to challenge myself, I may as well make it as interesting as possible!

Who were your early influences in the restaurant business?

I am constantly drawing influence from everywhere around me. Before moving to Portland I enjoyed cooking but did not work at it to the same degree I do now. I wasn't geeking out on celebrity chefs and crafting my style based on books and TV shows. More recently, I've drawn influence from numerous people I've worked with locally. Cooks and chefs who are so dedicated to what they do and so passionate about food are truly inspiring to be around. The conversations we have about food and work affect me far more than any celeb could.

What food trends do you most embrace?

I try not to embrace any trends because in most cases that is all they are...trends. That being said, I explore everything and if it works I will try and fit it into a tried and true framework that makes up my approach to food. Much ado has been made about "molecular gastronomy," which more accurately describes a branch of science than a style of food. I certainly don't place myself in that category of chefs, but I do embrace the use of science and cold hard facts to improve how I cook things. I've been able to put the sous vide method to good use in my kitchen as a means to an end rather than catch phrase to print on the menu. Mainly I enjoy exploring new methods and understanding how all processes work in order to achieve the best possible results.

What food trends do you wish would go die a quiet death?

Full disclosure: I am about to make a hypocrite of myself! The trend I wish would die a quiet death is playful recreations of classics and comfort foods. Pretty much anything in "quotations" makes me cringe. Yes...I've done it before! Looking back at the menus from all of the East Side Dining Club events I shake my head and wonder what I was thinking. Let me be clear, I have no problem with exploring new recipes and creative interpretations of anything, but the cheekiness has gotten out of hand! I suppose it's hard to resist, though. Right now I serve a steak sauce that is modeled after A-1. It's essentially the same thing, minus the industrial additives and with some higher end ingredients. I call it B-Two sauce, partly because it matches the initials of the restaurant's name and partly because I'm admitting that I just knocked off A-1.

Is that too cheeky? Maybe it is...I said I'm a hypocrite?

Whats your favorite dish on the menu at Belly Timber?

My favorite dish is whatever is new. I get super excited about new dishes, and when that excitement starts to fade and the dish is no longer my favorite, I change it. It's more difficult to make something well when you're not geeking out about it and throwing up high fives every time it gets ordered. (we don't really high five all the time, that was more of a metaphor....or was it?)

With the economy, how has BT been holding up all in all? Where there adjustments that needed to be made?

We held pretty tight to our original price structure even as the economic situation unfolded. Even though none of the major woes had begun when we were planning Belly Timber, the writing was on the wall so to speak. We tried to set a price point that reflects the quality of the food but is accessible at that same time, and I think we have succeeded for the most part in doing that. It's been my observation that people have not stopped dining out, they have simply become more selective about where they go. It's been my goal to give our guests a reason to come back rather than create all sorts of price incentives to draw deal hunters in.

Anything else on the horizon for you? Spill the beans...

I'm not really sure what's next. I've got no shortage of ideas, but I'm waiting for the right signs to act on any of them. Time and patience will always show the right path!

I'd like to thank Chef Seigel for taking the time out of his busy schedule to answer some questions for us, if you want to know more about Belly Timber [visit their website](#) or follow Chef Seigel on Twitter – [@BellyTimberPdx](#). If you are a Portland Chef, and would like to answer a few questions you can find me on Twitter: [@Rain Delay](#) or email me at tdraindelay [at] gmail dot com.