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## Belly Timber's David Siegel Talks Pork (And Other Things)

Once upon a time, when someone mentioned Belly Timber Executive Chef David Siegel, I immediately thought of candied bacon.



Namely because the first time my sister and I ate at the restaurant, back when it first opened in Summer '08, David sent us out some candied bacon to sample at the end of the meal, and because we were so happily, excruciatingly full and slightly drunk (the bartender had been very generous with cocktail samples and wine flights), and didn't want to hurt David's feelings by leaving the bacon uneaten, we thought it was an excellent idea to wrap the bacon in a napkin and put it in my voluminous handbag. A few days later, one of my coworkers, a vegan whom I frequently sparred with over food philosophies, asked for a kleanex. I scabbled around in my bag and flung the neatly folded

asked for a kitchen. I scabbled around in my bag and hung the heavy folded napkin at her. I think you can imagine her choice commentary. I did not do it on purpose, I swear.

Nowadays, when I hear David's name, I think of pigstrami, widely acclaimed BT Burgers and house made french fries with bone marrow aioli, crispy fried pigtails, and peach and pork belly fried pies. I visited David at Belly Timber last weekend, and after he finished prepping a salt cod and potato soup and putting it on the stove, we sat down in the gracious dining room of the restored Victorian house the restaurant resides in and had a chat about David's progression from waiting tables in Connecticut to cooking in some of Portland's most notable kitchens to being recently named one of trend-spotting 944 Magazine's "Most Buzzworthy Chefs in America." We also talked about ham hock hot pots, bad boy-free kitchens, the joys of Twitter, and wild quince yeast, and David invented a new word, "porkiness," which I think you will agree, is infinitely superior to "unfriend."

**You're from the East Coast, and didn't intend to be a professional chef. Now you're the Executive Chef at one of Portland's best restaurants. So...what's a guy like you doing in a place like this?**

I've always liked eating for sure. I started working food service in high school and the industry always made sense to me. I've done everything in restaurants—waited tables, bartended, managed a little bit, but mostly I worked in kitchens. I studied restaurant and hotel management at Boston University so I was always going to go into this field, but I actually came out here looking for front of the house work. I had been waiting tables full time while saving money to move, but I had done so much cooking in my past—never at really great restaurants but I had done and learned quite a bit. I was looking to move up the ladder and move more towards management and ownership but I was only able to find work in kitchens here, so I took that.

**What made you choose Portland?**

I was in desperate need of a change of scenery.

**Oooo, that sounds dramatic, is there a story here? A broken heart, maybe?**

No! Although I may have broken some hearts leaving. (laughs) But I needed a change of scenery, I was living in Boston, I had gone to school there and stayed on to work and actually loved the city but you can't just stay in one place forever. So I moved back to Connecticut, where I'm from originally, for a little while to save money and figure out what I wanted to do. I was there for a year and at the end of the year I decided that I'd spent too long planning and thinking about it, and I needed to be impulsive. I'd been looking at Portland among other places, but Portland seemed to be the most feasible. So I packed up my car and drove here in September of 2005.

**Total leap-of-faith style?**

No job, no apartment. I'd visited once to find an apartment, a few months before, which I didn't find, so I drove out here completely cold. I wanted to get really far away, so the West Coast made sense. When I came to Portland, I didn't really know what was going on here food-wise, it was kind of dumb luck, but after a little while here I realized what was going on. I met interesting people through work and I started to take cooking more seriously.

**You've worked in some great kitchens.**

My first job was Fenouil, actually, but I didn't stay there very long. I helped them open and left not long after. I was able to get a job at Nostrana, and that was where I settled in and started learning more about what was going on in Portland. I met some really great people and started taking cooking quite a bit more seriously. I started at Nostrana in November of 2005 and they were named Restaurant of the year that following spring. It was very exciting to be not only at a great restaurant, but one that was now recognized and very popular. While at Nostrana, I started the East Side Dining Club with friends whom I worked with there, and I also started working part time at Meriwether's when Tommy Habetz became chef there. Then I left Nostrana and went to work full time at Meriwether's. I was there for pretty much Tommy's whole time there, we left right about the same time, me for this and him for what became Bunk Sandwiches.

**Tell me about your kitchen philosophies. Are you a bad boy chef? Do you burn people with hot pans and slice them up with knives?**

No. The bad boy chef persona and the bad boy kitchen image that's been popularized and sensationalized through books and TV, I think it's definitely what a lot of kids going to culinary school and adults going back to culinary school are dreaming of, and it's something that runs so counter to everything I believe in in terms of how to run a restaurant.

**So you're saying you don't scald anyone with hot pans? (Interviewer is slightly disappointed.)**

No. It's tempting sometimes, but no. Everything I do here is based on learning patience and humility, not driving people to produce through fear or goading them into performing more. I'd rather try to teach them calmness and confidence in what they're doing so they can move deliberately and execute things well and want to produce well because they take pride in what they are doing. We don't blast music here or hang out and drink a lot after work, nobody comes to work hungover, they wouldn't last here. Nobody gets yelled at, nobody gets berated, you would never get to a point in this kitchen where that was necessary.

(David gets up abruptly.) I want to show you something. (Leaves and returns with the November issue of 944 Magazine, where he is listed as one of the "Most Buzzworthy Chefs in America" for 2009.)

For this interview I was asked, 'What five essential ingredients should any kitchen have?' Everybody else spoke about olive oil and butter and whatnot, but I took a different approach to that, it sums up perfectly how I feel.

**"Patience, humility, strong work ethic, personal pride, and salt."  
That's great. And congratulations for the recognition.**

Nobody in Portland knows what 944 is so it will go completely unnoticed that I was in the magazine, but—

**(Interviewer interrupts, rather embarrassedly) Well, actually, I saw it on an episode of *Kourtney and Khloé Take Miami*. Not that I watch that show, because I do NOT, but I was, you know, channel surfing that night. Please don't judge me.**

(laughs, in what might possibly be a judgmental tone) 944 got in touch with me

and before I committed to anything I wanted to know who they are, why they got in touch with me, what this was all about, and I said 'listen, I have no delusions about my position in the Portland restaurant scene, why didn't you call someone else, we're not really the most popular restaurant,' and they said 'exactly, but we've heard quite a bit about you.'

**You're up and coming! How would you describe the food you're making at Belly Timber?**

That has taken me a long time to pin down and I'm not really there yet, but it's French and Italian inspired bistro food. But because I have no connection to any certain type of cuisine, all I am is American, the food that I do here is American in nature, in that it draws on all the influences around me, mainly French and Italian, to sort of land at a new version of cuisine. We're not trying to be anything other than a bistro on Hawthorne.

**Candied bacon, pigstrami, fried pig tails—you certainly seem to have a yen for pork.**

That's a Portland influence, it's all around us here. Over the last year, I tried to grow past a lot of the trends that are so prevalent here in Portland, not because they aren't good but because there are so many other people doing them so well, I'd rather try and branch out. But that focus on pork is something I never really could get away from, and I don't necessarily want to. We have all the pork at the top of the menu, in this section called The Whole Hog, so I can focus it all right here and explore other things on the rest of the menu. I try to keep that heavy porkiness and meatiness out of all the other dishes.

**What are some of your favorite ingredients to work with?**

Um. Pork. (laughs) Right now rice is very interesting to me. This is not an Asian restaurant, it never will be, but Asian food of all styles is very much in vogue right now and is something I enjoy eating very much. I have a ham hock hot pot made with a really rich broth from ham hocks and we throw in seasonal vegetables, whatever we're working with at the moment, right now there's Brussels sprouts and winter squash. We make some housemade roughly cut noodles and cook it all up to order and then top it with a little fresh salad of microgreens or shaved cabbage and some housemade pork flakes. Now that the weather is cold and we're starting to see winter in full swing, we're selling quite a few of those, it's a really hearty warming sort of soup.

**What other menu offerings are you enamored with at the moment?**

A few of my favorites are the escargot with yellow beets, chickpeas & bone marrow, the grilled cauliflower with anchovy, cacao nibs, sage & juniper syrup, the pork shoulder chop, with turnips, apples, boudin maison & hazelnuts, and the borscht, sweet potato pudding & brussels sprout hash. The rice gnocchi with the quail are also way cool!

**What inspires you?**

At the risk of sounding cliché, I'm definitely inspired by ingredients. This is ingredients driven food and we change our menu weekly, working with what's in season, what we can get that's of great quality at the moment. Also by technique, if there's something new I want to work with or a new technique or flavor combination I want to master. And I definitely draw inspiration from what other people are doing around me, what I'm reading about and what

people are talking about. You know, food is fashion, and we try to stay current.

**What do you read to stay current?**

I like to read cookbooks. I have a large cookbook collection. They tend to be more technique driven—"On Food and Cooking," Harold McGee's book, is definitely in my repertoire, and over Thanksgiving I was gifted the Momofuku cookbook, I've been poring over it. It's fun to sit and read about something completely different, it's like a getaway from what I'm doing here.

**According to your Twitter, you're working on rice gnocchi, and sourdough starter made with wild yeast from the skin of a quince. You seem to have a very strong curiosity about new foods.**

I like figuring things out. Which doesn't necessarily mean I'm great at it, but I enjoy figuring out how to do things by myself rather than buying a product. The rice gnocchi is very new. I was looking at Korean rice cakes, which I've never tasted, but they looked like gnocchi and I was reading about how they're made, with rice flour and water, and I went somewhere completely different with it. We use cooked rice and rich flour and the end result is really really crispy and toasted on the outside.

The starter with the quince happened when I wanted to do a flatbread as part of our pork menu, we do pork cheek flatbread and mushroom flatbread at happy hour, so I was poring over some recipes that involved active dry yeast for the dough. One of the guys who works here brews his own beer, and for one of the beers he made, he used wild yeast to ferment it, he just covered his pot in cheesecloth to keep out dirt and leaves and put it outside on a summer day and let whatever wild yeasts were in the air get into his beer. It gives it this sour tangy flavor. I had just gotten a bunch of quince locally from someone's tree, and quince are covered in fuzz, a lot of which is yeast. I thought, why don't we make our own sourdough starter and make it with the quince yeast. The thought of using a local wild product to make our starter rather than just yeast we bought from the store seemed kind of neat.

**You utilize Twitter a lot, how does that work for you? What's your strategy?**

Engaging people is my strategy. I've taken my cue from Whiffies and other food cart owners who've used it so successfully, by engaging the people following me. Portland is perfect for Twitter, because it's such a small town and I can run into these people at the food carts after work, or I can say 'pop your head into the kitchen when you come and eat' and they do, in a huge place like New York that might not be possible.

**Speaking of Whiffies, you make signature pies for them sometimes, don't you? How'd that come about?**

We would go down to Whiffies and eat pie and one day I said 'All I think about all day is what I would put in a pie,' and Gregg said, 'Let's do it then.' I did peaches and pork belly with pecans and one with corn and bone marrow and a couple vegan pies one with chickpeas and grilled eggplant and one with swiss chard and golden raisins and pine nuts.

**Yum. What are you favorite restaurants in Portland?**

I enjoy going to Pok Pok and Podnah's Pit BBQ, those are my standby restaurants for out of town guests because I know everybody will always enjoy

them. If I'm going out and I want fabulous food and money is no object I always go to Paley's Place. Beaker & Flask is good, Ned Ludd...Park Kitchen, Le Pigeon, you know, everybody's favorites.

**There are a ton of new restaurants opening in Portland right now, what do you think of that?**

It's exciting! There are definitely a few on the top of my list to try, I would love to try Olympic Provisions, and the new Whiskey Soda Lounge, and Spints.

**What's it like being a young chef in Portland right now?**

The best thing about being a young chef in Portland is that if you have a strong work ethic you can really make things happen for yourself here. I fully credit my success here in Portland with the fact that there are very few barriers to entry here. In a city like New York you're going to be a small fish forever because there's so much competition, but in Portland if you work hard you can really accomplish anything here. There are so many great upstarts, self-made restaurateurs, I think that's proof positive that anything you want to do in Portland, you can.

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## David Siegel

Executive Chef, Belly Timber  
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It's his very first "executive chef" title and outpost, evidence that quite a few discerning foodies have faith in the potential of 29-year-old David Siegel. Housed literally inside a restored Victorian house in Southeast Portland, the clever French-Italian cuisine at Belly Timber (Victorian slang for "food of all sorts") has been deemed quite the culinary find, garnering rave after rave by locals and critics alike. Escargot fans claim there's no better rendition than Siegel's dish — escargot prepared with bone marrow, pickled garlic, yellow beets and chickpeas.

**944:** What food myth would you like to dispel?

**DAVID SIEGEL:** The idea that good food needs to be complex and difficult to prepare is simply not true. Some is and that has its time and place, but anyone can cook if they stick with the things they like and take some time to appreciate the process.

**944:** What's been your biggest challenge?

**DS:** This is my first executive chef opportunity and no matter how much time I had to practice, gaining the confidence to do this job well has been an uphill battle. The support of an amazing staff in both the front and back of the house has helped me quite a bit.

**944:** What five essential ingredients should every kitchen have?

**DS:** Patience, humility, strong work ethic, personal pride and salt.