

Portland Mercury

FOOD AND DRINK » LAST SUPPER

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Belly Romance

Rethinking the Amorous Dinner at Belly Timber

by [Patrick Alan Coleman](#)

From the sidewalk on SE Hawthorne, Belly Timber is a vision of Victorian romance. Framed by clapboard siding in the street-facing window, one might see a smiling candle-lit couple chatting over dinner, gazing intimately into each other's eyes, forks poised in front of their lips.

The problem is, with the exception of the one table visible from the street, Belly Timber isn't romantic. Though pretty, the interior of the somber Victorian home can be loud and cramped even with minimal occupancy. Neighbors are so close it's impossible to avoid their dinner conversation. On a recent evening I learned of one diner's amusement at buying a table saw, and of another's struggle with cancer, all while trying to focus on my wife's workday recap.

Still, romance is what you make it. I'm inclined to argue that, even though the ambiance at Belly Timber is more clubby than cloistered, quality food makes all the difference. The truth is, once the meat from the beef short ribs (\$10/\$18) is plucked from the bone and begins melting in your mouth—with impeccable tenderness, roast beef savor, and hints of cinnamon—the discomforting room falls away and the loudest sound becomes the crispy crunch of leeks and your own yummy noises.

It's also easy to forget the room's din with rustic starters like Brussels sprouts, white beans, and guanciale (house-cured pig jowl bacon), with its fine mix of salty bacon crunch and sprout bitterness (\$8). Or there's the duck and quince rilette (\$8; think smooth fatty pâté), and its accompaniment of spicy arugula, sweet cranberry sourness, and hazelnuts.

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PHOTO BY DAVID REAMER

[Belly Timber](#)
3257 SE Hawthorne
235-3277

This is simple food served simply. The entrées are available in two hunger-proportionate sizes with ingredients that can be counted on one hand. A single cannelloni (\$9) is filling with rich truffled ricotta and the sparkle of celery root; while the substantial BT burger (\$10) is easily shareable, cooked to temperature, given zing by pickled onions, and paired with crunch-crisp hand-cut fries and addictive bone marrow aioli.

Or shore up your belly walls by pairing the house-cured charcuterie plate (\$8)—with favorites like mild sopresseta rounds and newfangled morsels like pig-strami—with a full order of feta-topped, filo-wrapped spinach and mushrooms (\$14) on a bed of sweet, pear-like parsnip puree.

As for social lubrication, the bar needs some fine-tuning. Many options are fine, but steer clear of the strange-tasting bacon bourbon Manhattan and the pleasant (but-not-really-a) Sazerac.

When it comes down to it, romantic atmosphere helps, but it can't top great food. And what's more romantic than sharing great food with someone you love?

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