

Restaurant review: Belly Timber

Published: Wednesday, September 03, 2008, 10:59 AM Updated: Friday, February 19, 2010, 4:04 PM



David Sarasohn, The Oregonian



The Oregonian

There's a long local tradition of boutique restaurants in old Portland houses, which date from a time when kitchens were built for company. Something about the quirkiness of the old wooden gables and rafters seems to speak to the creativity of chefs, as long as the pre-war paint doesn't get into the stew.

Belly Timber owners Michele Stultz and Tara George -- who also own Equinox in North Portland -- insist that is not the point of the name, even though its home is indeed a gingerbread explosion of bay windows and polished wood floors. They maintain that it's Victorian slang for food -- and Sir Walter Scott seems to agree with them, although nobody has read Scott since the peak of Portland cuisine was beef jerky -- but they've opened one of the least-Victorian restaurants in town.

This is a place where the charcuterie plate includes pigstrami.

That fact tells you much of what you need to know about Belly Timber, a restaurant of considerable imagination, skill and wit, not to mention a piece of the prevailing pork passion. Its kitchen is run by David Siegal, late of

Nostrana and Meriwether's, and its dishes are creative and unexpected, the kind of thing you might have gotten if Emily Dickinson, brooding upstairs in her own Victorian, had given up poetry for menu planning.



The OregonianThe charcuterie plate

The pigstrami, for example, takes the currently fashionable pork belly and gives it the pepper-crusting of pastrami, giving an edge to the meat's unctuousness. And it's not even the most striking element on the platter; that title goes to pork frites, pork confit deep-fried into crunchy rectangles, enthralling even if it would break a cholesterol sampler.

A marginally healthier but equally imaginative opener is shrimp, sweet corn, Swiss chard -- and, of course, pork belly -- over grilled polenta. It's an inviting combination of sweet and savory, with more textures than a paint store. Even the grilled cuttlefish, kohlrabi and endive salad -- I know, you just had that for lunch -- is punched up with a bacon vinaigrette.

Belly Timber also does fine with some healthy openers, like heirloom tomatoes with chick peas and cream fraiche. It's only the (heavily) batter-fried seasonal vegetables that make you suspect the menu is trying to kill you.

Health is not a theme with some of the most dramatic entrees, either, but you're likely to forgive it. In a heartfelt tribute to Iowa, a moist, well-grilled pork chop comes with sweet creamed corn with an unexpected kick at the back of it, and a smoked pork slaw. An admirable burger comes with crisp fries and bone marrow aioli, which could be the richest element known to either chefs or organic chemistry. With aioli, of course, you're starting with egg yolks, but marrow just gives it that extra fillip, and it works quite well with fries,



The OregonianThe banana pudding with candied bacon

Other entrees are fine, if not quite so extreme. A bavette steak, something like a skirt or a flank, is juicy and vivid, set off by a sorrel butter sauce. A cilantro tang enlivens an impressively moist roasted half chicken, and fresh pappardelle are firm enough to stand up to multiple morsels of rabbit -- although chunks of olive throw their weight around and threaten to take over.

Pierogies with pine-nut butter seem flatter than the rest of the menu, more doughy than dazzling. Of course, you could get a half-order of them and a half-order of pappardelle, an option that most places don't give you.

It's hard to believe that this kind of pork-pervasive place could keep swine out of its sweets, and sure enough, there's that increasingly seen strip of sugared bacon atop the banana pudding. But whether you actually eat it, or save it for later to dip into maple syrup, focus on the banana pudding: ripe bananas in sweet goeey cream with hunks of cake mixed in, it's like somebody finally did a schoolroom dessert right.

You can feel more grown-up with the Stumptown custard with caramel foam, a nifty presentation of a coffee pot de creme. Peanut butter panna cotta, however, seems just conceptually wrong, with thick and airy textures in conflict, even sitting on an inviting chocolate cookie.

Prices here are moderate; only one entree reaches \$20, and the half-order option gets many below \$10. Two people might have trouble reaching \$100.

That's true even if they explore Belly Timber's intriguing house cocktail list. Every place offers an Arnold Palmer (iced tea and lemonade); Belly Timber has a John Daly, which is mostly bourbon. The bar specializes in quirky takes on local distilled spirits, a widening palette to invoke.

Belly Timber is quirky, creative and engaging, a feeling bolstered by servers who are clearly in on the joke. And if pork confit frites and bone marrow aioli land with a certain impact, well, the place isn't called Belly Twigs.