

A FINER DINER

Chez What? brings kink to the Alberta neighborhood

by Peter Zuckerman



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Keri Salim, patron saint to the tattooed and pierced

Halloween spiders and skulls drip off the ceiling and swing from side to side. Porcelain poodles line the walls. Plastic centipedes crawl up the display case and toward the tables. A stack of board games balances on top of a cabinet. Mellow music beats in the background.

What is this place?

"It's like a coral reef," waitress Holly Morgan says. "New layers get deposited every few months. People are like, 'I don't want to keep this and I don't want to get rid of it—let's give it to Chez What!'"

Owner Keri Salim has a different interpretation. "It's like we're running a welfare program for the tattooed and pierced."

Words escape Salim—who just so happens to have a tattoo of a tarantula scuttling up her leg and a double piercing slicing through her eyebrow. She throws her hands up into the air.

"Don't ask me how to describe it," she says. "I'm just the owner. Ask Holly—she works here."

Morgan tosses her pink hair and pauses. Then she looks pleased. Has she finally figured out how to describe this place?

"It's a family," Morgan says. "A stone soup of the neighborhood, a big old hodgepodge."

A quick scan of the menu reveals an eclectic array of selections, from the "California Hangover" to the "Orteaze Narly Burger" to old-fashioned pancakes. Chez What? serves lunch, dinner, Sunday brunch and cocktails.

However, customers quickly learn this is no ordinary diner. Down-to-earth servers don't hesitate to plop themselves down at tables while taking food orders, making the interaction seem more like a polite conversation.

One waiter wears a tank top that reads "I eat cock" and shows a picture of a rooster. He has two button earrings. Tattoos dot his arms, and he looks like he might play drums in a punk band.

Another waiter has dreadlocks that stream past his shoulders. He sits down at an elderly woman's table and starts up a chat session. In addition to the punks, queers, neighbors, black families, baby dykes and trans patrons, Chez What? also seems to appeal to an older clientele.

"Older customers say it reminds them what

it's like to be young," Salim says. "One of them once told me they found this place inspiring."

The elderly woman keeps chuckling as she talks to the waiter. It seems like the customers really get to know who serves them here.

The joint's quiriness extends beyond the dining room. Entering the bathroom is like sneaking inside some modern sculpture, with glitter sparkling off the boldly painted walls and ceiling.

Employees share this zest for Chez What? and, like the customers, often return there. They appreciate how Salim becomes friends with her staff and zooms off to concerts with them.

"Once you start working for Chez What? you always come back," Morgan explains. "It's a supportive environment, especially if you want to pursue a creative effort."

The idea for Chez What? began when Salim was 16 and working for a "feminine-lesbian-vegetarian cafe." She vowed that she would open her own restaurant someday. "Cooking was the only thing I did well," she explains.

After cooking school and a stint at the Marriott, Salim opened Chez What? seven years ago. "Business has always gone well," she says. "We're not always making money, but we're always having a lot of fun. Customers get involved with it. It's always been like a community center."

Chez What? moved to its present location in the Alberta neighborhood three years ago and plans to expand with a lounge featuring a full-service bar that opens its doors in August. The space will include karaoke, pinball machines, a movie night and a queer night at least every month.

When asked about her favorite aspect of working at Chez What?, Salim proudly tells the story of how she used to keep a shrine to Tully Bevilacqua at the restaurant. One day, the Portland Fire basketball player walked in.

"I got to meet her!" Salim exclaims. "I even got to cook her food!"

CHEZ WHAT? is located at 2203 N.E. Alberta St. The telephone number is 503-281-1717.

PETER ZUCKERMAN is a student at Reed College and an intern at Just Out.



Beautiful Faces

Permanent Cosmetics
lips, eyeliner, areolas
eyebrows, traditional tattoo
free consultation

Shawna Holder 503/408-7779 pgr 503/301-7777 10140 SE Pine, Ste. B

You want to get...

Intimate?

Tired of Big Church?

Open Fellowship ~ Progressive Beliefs ~ Intimate Worship

Lincoln St. United Methodist • Sun. 9:00 Worship • 5145 SE Lincoln St.

We call it the
'110% Service Plan'

Many realtors provide competent service.

At Bridgetown Realty, we go one step further...we do it with a level of communication and care that is so formidable that over 85% of our business is through referrals.

So if you know anyone thinking of buying or selling, please give us a call...we're always looking for one more satisfied customer.



503/287.9370



Member: International Relocation Services

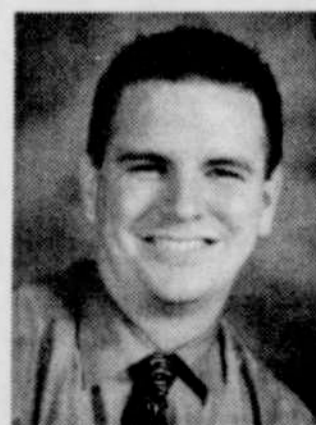
www.bridgetownrealty.com

Here's the best personal financial advice we can offer.
Get some.

What can a Waddell & Reed financial advisor do for you? Help you define your goals, show you what you need to do to reach them, explain your options, answer your questions and help you create a financial plan specifically tailored to your family's needs and dreams. We can introduce you to a full range of investment options to help your plan succeed.

In other words, we provide the expertise you probably want, probably need and probably don't have.

That's our advise. And here's where you can get it.



Eric Brown, District Manager
500 NE Multnomah
Portland, OR 97232
503.238.6036



WADDELL
& REED
Financial Services®
Member SIPC

2001 Chairman's
Advisory Board Member

Investing. With a plan.™