

**W**ith a name like Wild Abandon, an establishment has a lot to live up to.

This funky gay-owned restaurant, located in a cozy single-story building covered in ivy, makes the grade. It serves an eclectic array of "new American" cuisine, which covers everything from cioppino to risotto, from crab cakes to strip steaks, from tortas to tortes.

Inside, the tables are covered with butcher paper and little jars of crayons for patrons' self-expression. Even the chairs encompass a diverse mix of styles.

A fresco on the rear wall depicts muscled men and women wearing green togas and eating apples in an Eden-like setting. The rest of the place is filled with local artwork for sale.

The restaurant is lit by a combination of faux 19th century London lamps and colored glass '70s swag lights, an obsession of owner Michael Cox. A two-level patio out back is decorated with herb and plant boxes.

Before Wild Abandon opened, the building was home to several other restaurants. Back in the '70s it was a massage parlor, Ginger's Sexy Sauna.

Cox bought Wild Abandon along with four other waiters. "I wanted to open a restaurant, but I didn't have the money to do it myself. I sorta had this utopian concept that our differences would all create some kind of wonderful balance and it would all come together and be great. Sort of like communism. It fell apart like the Soviet Union and at the same time."

Cox left for six months when the differences didn't get ironed out. When he came back, he bought out the others. He has largely run the restaurant himself for the past six years.

Many of his customers are members of the sex-

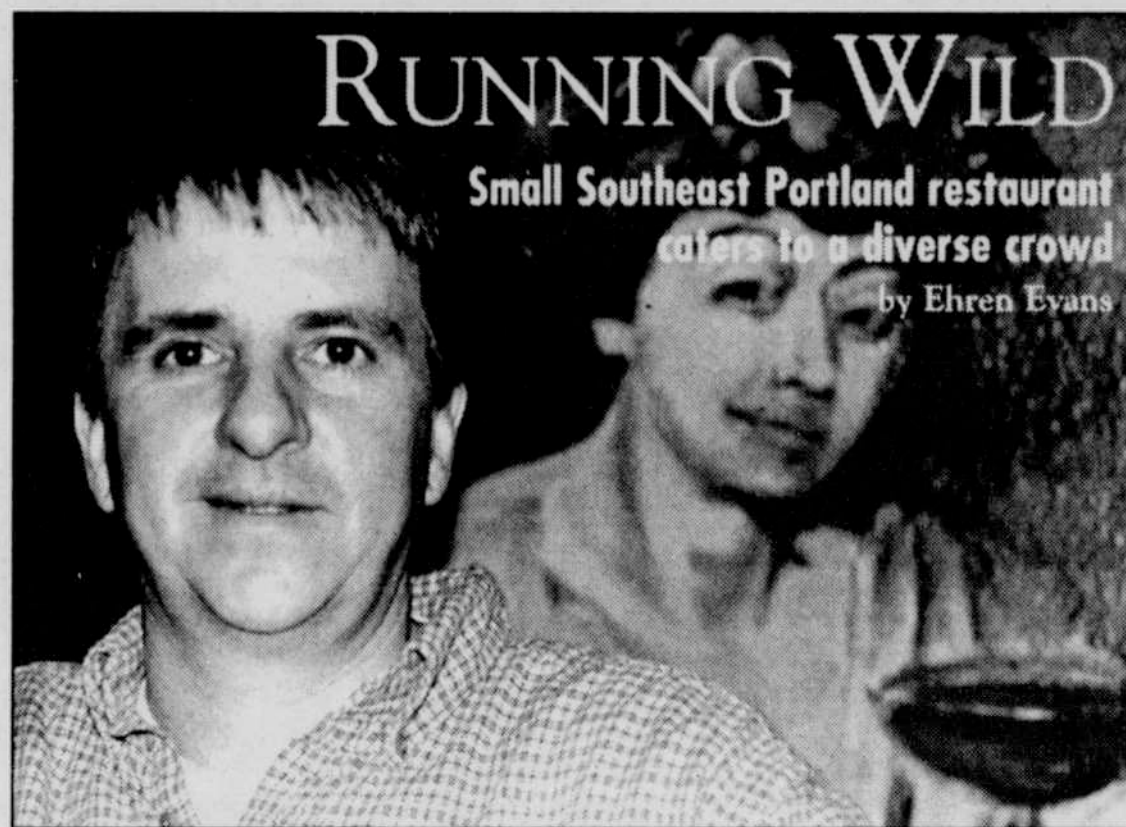
ual minorities community. Wild Abandon returns the favor by supporting a number of gay and lesbian causes, including Cascade AIDS Project and Basic Rights Oregon.

The restaurant also helps raise money for Our House, a residential care facility for those living with and dying from AIDS. The owner adopted the nonprofit partly because it is local and needs financial support. "People need to remember that the AIDS epidemic is not over," says Cox, who has had a couple of friends spend their last days at Our House.

He also has supported a variety of lesbian causes, including sponsoring a softball team. The goal, according to Cox, is to make everyone feel welcome.

"I think it's a win-win situation," he says of the charitable contributions. "Just from a business standpoint, people appreciate that. It's goodwill for the community. It's good for business, and it's just good karma."

This symbiotic relationship is not surprising considering Wild Abandon is located in liberal Southeast Portland. Cox recalls only one homophobic incident in more than 6 1/2 years of operation: During the Measure 13 battle, a



Wild Abandon owner Michael Cox admits his original utopian concept turned out to be less than ideal

## RUNNING WILD

Small Southeast Portland restaurant caters to a diverse crowd

by Ehren Evans

PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

"You know that old saying, 'Location, location, location'? It's true. It's been a struggle," Cox says. "People have to come here on purpose, so not much business happens on accident like you would have if you were on Hawthorne or Northwest 21st or 23rd. It's more difficult to open a restaurant and build your clientele in a residential location like this."

Because the building is grandfathered in from before the area was zoned residential, Wild Abandon cannot expand its site. Space is at a premium, with food stacked to the walls in the kitchen.

Cox would like to add a fryer, but no space is available under the fume hood. He also would like to repaint the outside walls without tearing down the ivy.

Regardless, Wild Abandon has prospered, and when people visit, they tend to come back. It will celebrate its seventh anniversary in February.

This is what happens when a restaurant cultivates community support, Cox says. "I kinda, you know, believe that you get back what you put out there in the universe." ■

WILD ABANDON is located at 2411 S.E. Belmont St. and can be reached at 503-232-4458. The restaurant is open from 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday, from 5:30 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday and from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. weekends.

EHREN EVANS' second hobby was organometallic chemistry. His first was writing. He can be reached at ehrkid2000@excite.com.

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