

SECRETS OF HIS SUCCESS

Portland restaurateur reveals his inspirations and aspirations

by Caitlin Smith

What do three of Portland's hottest restaurants—Zefiro, Saucebox and Bluehour—have in common? Bruce Carey.

He opened Zefiro in 1990 with former partner and chef Chris Israel. Offering Italian and French cuisine, it received enthusiastic reviews in the *New York Times*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Bon Appetit* and *Gourmet* and was named 1995's Restaurant of the Year by the *Oregonian*.

The opening of Zefiro coincided with the beginning of the Portland restaurant boom, and Carey has grown with it. He and Israel later opened the pan-Asian restaurant Saucebox, named 1998's Restaurant of the Year by the *Oregonian*.

The successful Zefiro closed in 2000, which surprised many. But Carey, who had been contemplating moving the restaurant to the Pearl District for a change of scene, says, "That was around the time of the millennium, and it seemed like a better time to wipe the slate clean."

With co-owner and chef Kenny Giambalvo, Carey opened Bluehour in a converted Pearl District warehouse in 2000. He hopes the restaurant, with cuisine similar to Zefiro's, offers an enjoyable dining experience. "We built Bluehour as a place where people could come celebrate...we try and keep up a celebratory tone and make things special."

Carey, a native Oregonian, began his restaurant career as a means to supplement his income as a student at University of Oregon. He worked as a waiter at the renowned Excelsior Cafe in Eugene and subsequently at the nationally acclaimed Zuni Cafe in San Francisco. Carey credits these earlier experiences with helping shape his culinary tastes and sense of style.

His inspirations always have come from traveling: "There's nothing...that we're doing at either Saucebox or Bluehour, or at Zefiro, that we invented necessarily. People have given me credit for bringing a lot of new things to Portland. That's not because I created them...it's just that I experienced them in other places."

For Zefiro "it was mostly the time that Chris and I spent in the south of France and northern Italy, Tuscany in particular." After their time in Europe, he says, "It seemed pretty clear what our favorite place would be like."

According to Carey, one of the most difficult aspects of the restaurant business is maintaining consistent quality. To facilitate this, he plays the role of customer.

He describes his evening routine: "I will leave the restaurant to go home to change, and then I'll come back. I'll be with Joe, my boyfriend, and we will pretend that we're customers. We'll come in the front door, not the back door. We'll wait at the front door until someone greets us before we

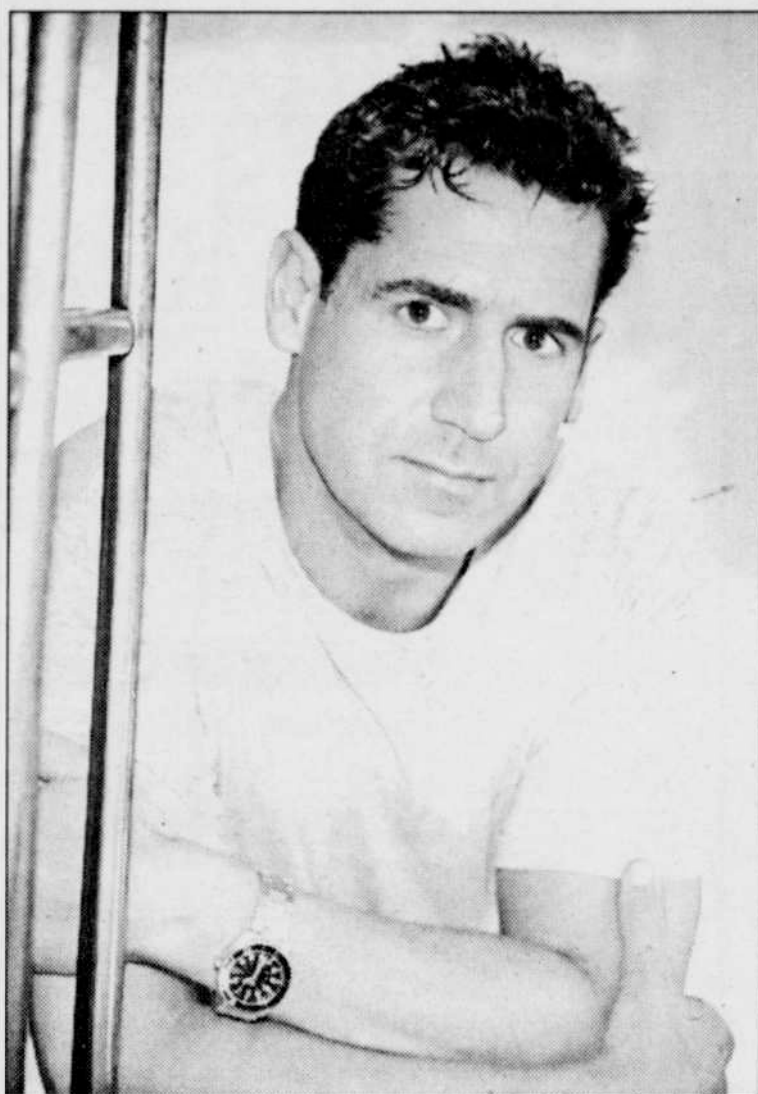


PHOTO BY BASIL CHILDBERS

Bruce Carey owns some of Portland's hottest restaurants

go in. And then we'll follow them to a table. We'll sit down with a menu, even though we know what's on the menu. But we'll consider the menu, and we'll ask questions about it."

The strenuous nature of the restaurant business hasn't dampened his enthusiasm. He enjoys making customers happy: "I want to give [people] what they want and what they expect. The most fun comes from doing that, doing it successfully and then just doing it a little bit more...whether it's kindness and good service or a California chardonnay or a particular combination of flavors from the kitchen that they haven't had before."

Despite his success, Carey remains modest and values his privacy. The only disadvantage of his fame is the lack of anonymity when eating out.

For the same reason, Carey shied away from introducing himself to actor Benicio del Toro, who frequented Saucebox while filming *The Hunted* in Portland. "It would be hard to be him, with strangers coming up," he comments. "It was enough for him to be in the restaurant. I didn't need to meet him."

Carey also appreciates the opportunities that his high-profile restaurants afford him. Festa, an annual fund-raiser for Cascade

AIDS Project, began as a memorial-turned-benefit party at Zefiro for a recently departed friend. It discontinued with the closing of the restaurant, but he says a similar event will be held every year at Bluehour, probably on its anniversary in September.

Looking toward the future, Carey hopes to run Saucebox and Bluehour indefinitely. He also would like to pursue his newfound passion for interior design. His first project as a consultant will renovate warehouse space to condominiums in Northwest Portland. "My head is exploding with ideas...I love the idea that I might be able to help people create better interior spaces," he says excitedly.

In the more immediate future, Carey and his boyfriend are planning a trip to France and Germany this August. Can we anticipate German influences in the Bluehour menu this autumn? Carey smiles, "Maybe." □

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