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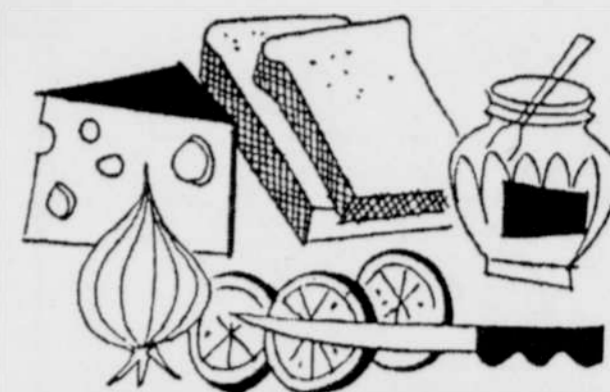
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BY CATHERINE SAMEH

For those with tastes that exceed their pocketbooks, Portland restaurants can be torture. There are so many fantastic places to have first dates or to nurture a broken heart—if only you didn't work for that nonprofit or just get laid off.

But we queers are resourceful and I'm here to tell you, you can have your cake and eat it for less money. This (all new!) column will explore moderately priced eateries where you can indulge expensive tastes without breaking the bank. This issue: great bars. Every issue: a light meal and drinks for \$20 or less.

Aalto Lounge • 3356 S.E. Belmont St.

Set in the heart of hipsterville, the Aalto is a retro lounge serving all-around comfort with a few rough edges. Grilled paninis are the specialty, complemented by cheese and antipasto plates, salads and a full bar. The Aalto mixes up specialty cocktails, although they aren't freshly squeezed. Recently the special was the Soviet, a delightfully light drink with vodka, vermouth, Cointreau and a maraschino cherry. It was served in a torpedo-style glass, fitting perfectly with the French lounge music by Serge Gainsbourg playing in the background. I washed down my melted Brie and spinach panini with a good glass of champagne and sat back to enjoy the local art on the walls, including beautiful paintings of gender-benders.

Blue Hour • 250 N.W. 13th Ave.

If you thought Blue Hour, set in the trendy Pearl District, was forever out of your price range, think again. This swanky restaurant features an equally swanky bar that offers amazing food at reasonable prices. The hamburger, for instance, is served with gorgonzola (are the French to thank for this trend?), arugula and pancetta on a freshly baked bun. Served with homemade, slightly spicy fries, it's a superb meal for \$9. The Caesar salad is another favorite on the bar menu, as is the fondue. Try a Northwest wine, a French beer or a fresh-squeezed cocktail to complement your meal. Even those with modest budgets can enjoy this ultra-urban paradise's outstanding food. Just stay in the bar.

Lucy's Table • 706 N.W. 21st Ave.

Remember when Lucy's Table opened? Remember when you read the incredible reviews and dreamed of going there? Well now you can, because every Monday through Friday Lucy's offers a cheap bar menu from 5 to 6:30 p.m. And I mean cheap. Every plate is \$3, as is every well drink and glass of wine. For \$17 each, including tip, my friends and I enjoyed a mouth-watering ravioli with goat cheese, brown butter sauce and pancetta; steamed mussels with champagne, shallots and cream; baby back ribs glazed with pomegranate; sautéed green beans with truffle oil and pine nuts; roasted beet salad; and two glasses of wine each. [M]

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