

Yo Bro Meet the brains behind the Aalto

BY MICHAEL E BARRETT

Watch out, Hawthorne: Belmont is quickly supplanting you as Southeast Portland's hipster hub. Leading the way is Peter Bro, gay owner of the Aalto Lounge, located in the heart of the district between 25th and 39th avenues. Together with his bi bartender/art curator Marne Lucas, Bro combines art, drink, good eats and ambiance in this neighborhood landmark.

Bro purchased the Aalto, where he was already on staff as a bartender, last September. His day job as a developer in the eastside industrial district "proved to be a hard animal to control" financially, and it was his need for capital to buy drywall that landed him the job at his favorite local bar.

When he discovered the owner was looking to sell, Bro feared the worst: A new owner would change not only the character of the bar but the staff, too. Armed with a soft heart, a level head and a touch of entrepreneurial spirit, Bro bought the bar with the help of a silent partner.

The 34-year-old sees the Aalto's role in Belmont as a "comfortable meeting place that can accommodate a lot of different groups—an 'every person's environment.'" He describes the atmosphere as "Euro-style" and insists its feel is more a reflection of the people who work and play there than a result of conscious ambiance tinkering: "I bought this bar, I didn't create it, but I understand the meaning and conviviality...it represents."

A "spillover effect" is common among the commercial establishments crammed into the blocks surrounding the Aalto's home near the corner of 34th and Belmont. With neighbors like Stumptown Coffee, Theater! Theatre! and the Blue Monk, the Aalto hosts a mixture of locals, regulars and visitors to the district.

Bro resists any attempt to typecast the Aalto's crowd, insisting it attracts a wide range of ages and sexual orientations and is unpredictable from one night to the next. "Sometimes you'll look around at 10 o'clock on a Saturday night, and there

are tables of 60-year-olds" among 20- and 30-somethings. And while many business owners "make a point of" getting to know their customers' names, one senses that Bro's familiarity with his own regulars comes naturally from the sheer joy of welcoming guests to his house of conversation and libations.

Despite Bro's claim that the people are what make the Aalto a special place, he deserves credit for creating the comfort zone that he has. The mood is warm and mellow, yet groovy, thanks to lighting that casts everyone present in sepia tone.

The buzz of talk and laughter steadily increases with the hour hand, though the music is always soft enough that it won't disrupt your chat (but loud enough to hear if you want to listen to it). Add a nice bottle of wine, a cold beer or one of the Aalto's simple cocktails and you're set for the evening.

There's a bonus, though!

When Bro bought the Aalto, he inherited Marne Lucas, the lounge's art curator and twice-weekly bartender. (A well-known local erotic photographer, Lucas also goes by the pseudonym Gina Velour, her stage name in an art film called *The Operation*.)

Lucas' knack for marketing and publicity, coupled with a discerning eye for unique and provocative work, enables her to book shows two years in advance with quality local art—plus some from elsewhere.

A recent show, for example, fell under both the "provocative" and "from elsewhere" categories, as Velour Productions presented Los Angeles photographer Steve Diet Goedde's nude portraits of The Porcelain Twinz, an Oregon erotic performance art duo. In February, Goedde and Lucas had concurrent shows at the Erotic Museum in Los Angeles.

Lucas, 35 ("going on 18"), is forthright in her assertion that the Aalto provides a more "inti-



Marne Lucas and Peter Bro create "every person's environment" night after night in the heart of the Belmont district

mate viewing space" than a traditional gallery. Her goal is to expose "local talent" to a clientele that enjoys a "mix of art, shopping and drinking." If steady sales are any indication, it's fair to say Lucas has developed a recipe for success, but the charm and character that her shows add to the Aalto cannot be understated.

In January the Aalto featured velvet paintings (remember those things from the '70s?) by Arnold Pander, son of renowned local painter Henk Pander (whose gargantuan 9- by 7-foot oil painting from *The War Series* occupies a good chunk of the west wall). Though the subject matter of Arnold's works is hardly the stuff of '70s kitsch, velvet paintings are velvet paintings nonetheless, which begs the question...why?

The "virtue of the work" is most important to Lucas in her selection process, but she readily admits to the nepotism she employs as a curator. In this case, her connection to the Pander family goes back several years: Arnold's brother Jacob is a former lover of hers and worked with her on *The Operation*. Still, the quality of the art is the foremost criterion, and, although the thought of velvet paintings invokes a feeling of discomfort to many a contemporary eye,

Pander the Younger did indeed tackle this medium with taste and ingenuity.

For Bro, Lucas is clearly a gem. As one of the "hot" women who work alongside the "gay boys" Bro employs, her enthusiasm, acumen and striking beauty complement the Aalto's other fine features. And he is genuinely, yet humbly, excited about the role he plays in her success as a curator: "For someone like Marne, this is an excellent outlet for her to flex her artistic muscle in the art community in a way she wouldn't otherwise be able to."

Portlanders who know Belmont probably already know the Aalto Lounge; those who have yet to discover the city's hippest 'hood can look forward to a warm introduction from Peter Bro. Whether looking for a scene, art or a good drink, this queer-friendly bar has it all. **✎**

The AALTO LOUNGE, 3356 S.E. Belmont St., is open from 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. nightly except Sunday. Beginning March 15, happy hour is 5 to 7 p.m. weekdays. Lisa DeJohn's abstract chalkboard paintings adorn the walls through March.

MICHAEL E BARRETT pens the "Epiqueerean" column once a month in Just Out.

What's ta eat?

Though more well-known as a drinking establishment featuring cocktails and a good selection of wine and beer, the Aalto's new menu offers patrons a variety of tasty appetizers, salads and light fare at moderate prices. Specialties range from more sophisticated creations like "tuna and piquillo peppers" salad to comfort food like "fried egg over easy on toast." Be on the lookout for a lunch menu, which is in the preparatory stages.

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