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castagna

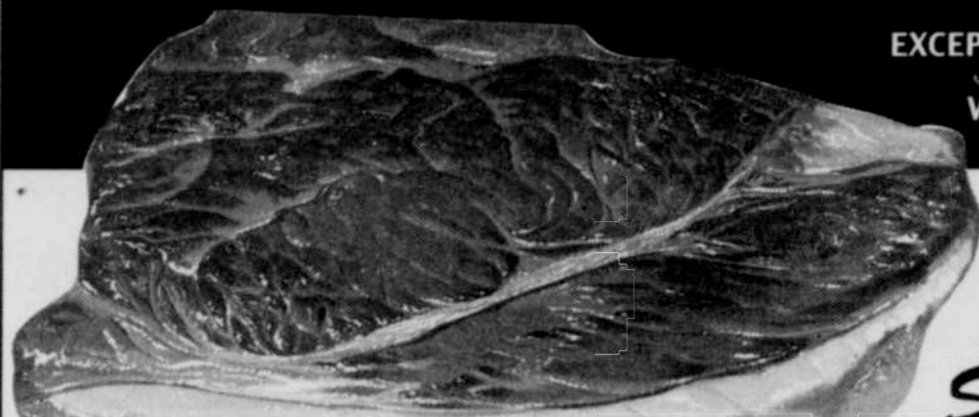


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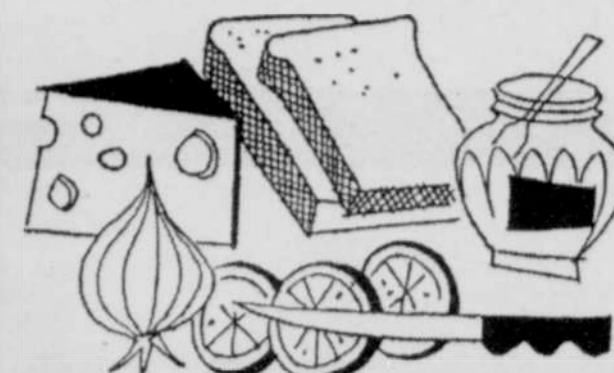
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BY MICHAEL E BARRETT

Weekend guests?

Your out-of-town friends are coming to Portland for the first time. What to do? Where to go? No visitor can gain an appreciation for the grandeur of Stumptown without experiencing our local cuisine. Portland remains one of America's best-kept culinary secrets with its array of eclectic eateries and (thankfully) paucity of chain restaurants. I took my sister, visiting from Las Vegas, on a food tour of Portland recently. The following is a portion of our itinerary, listed here in chronological order:

Navarre • 10 N.E. 28th Ave.

Portland is weird and quirky, so why not start out with Navarre, where quirkiness is secondary only to the superiority of its kitchen's creations. Simple and quite uninspiring at first glance, Navarre's stacks of canning jars, fresh vegetables and other ingredients not so strategically placed on tables, ledges and even corners of the floor give it the feel of a work-in-progress country kitchen. Your menu arrives with a fat marker for you to check off your food order. You even have to write in the specials yourself. The chef's daring creativity pays off at the first bite. A peach cucumber basil salad caught us by complete surprise and was a highlight of the experience. The steamed mussels were cooked to perfection in a delicate broth that did not compromise their natural flavor, as many broths do. The "bird" of the day was chicken smothered in thick almond gravy that left us wonderfully satiated and anxious to return.

Wine Down on 28th • 126 N.E. 28th Ave.

Just a few steps from Navarre sits one of Portland's most romantic spots. Wine Down is perfect for a date or an outing with friends. Dimly lit, cozy and warmed by a fireplace, this is truly a place to wind down, enjoy a glass of wine and peck at a fruit and cheese plate. On a cold night, the hazelnut pesto baked brie is a great accompaniment to a glass of red wine. The best seats in the house are the leather chairs near the fireplace. The radiating heat enhances the romantic mood and invites relaxation, and it will open your glass of red to maximum enjoyment.

Park Kitchen • 422 N.W. Eighth Ave.

Park Kitchen boasts a trendy look and feel worthy of Pearl District chic with an out-of-the-ordinary brunch menu meant to impress. Filling and unique, the bacon and cheddar cornbread pudding is definitely a favorite. The chutney-like tomato jam that adorns the top is slightly tart and a mandatory complement to the egg and bacon cooked inside crumbly cornbread. Commeal waffles topped with fresh fruit and crème fraiche are a great alternative for a sweet tooth. Sides are included: Don't miss out on the thick, crunchy latkes.