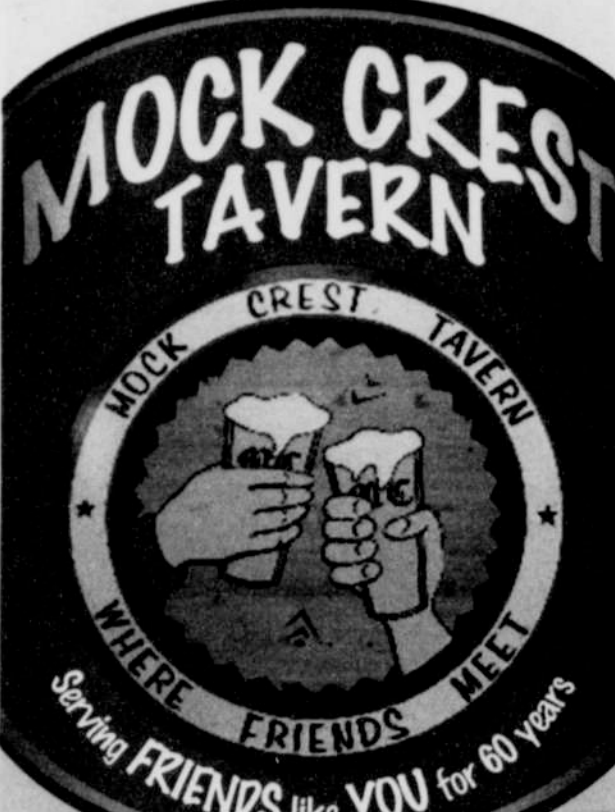




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Epiqueerean
BY JENNY NGUYEN

Best of the Year

While columnist Jenny Nguyen takes a much-needed breather, here's a look back at her biggest raves of the past 12 months.

Sel Gris

1852 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd., 503-517-7770,
www.selgris.net

By far the best meal of 2007. When I am literally tearing up over the perfection of the thymus glands of a lamb, you know it's serious. The crisp balls of sweetbreads served with a soft-cooked egg and apple butter bacon made me forget everything I have ever put in my mouth before. The chanterelle mushroom ravioli with brown butter and fried sage was silky, complex and nutty, perfectly accented with pickled cipollinis. The sautéed mussels with saffron cream and Spanish chorizo melted on the tongue like soft, fleshy cushions of the sea. The glossy, dark brown lamb shank sat atop tender lentils de puy with a generous spackling of the namesake sel gris infused with lavender. Suddenly it's just this plate and me...one bite and the rest is history. ["When the Ball Drops," Jan. 4]

a Cena

7742 S.E. 13th Ave., 503-206-3291,
www.acenapdx.com

Let's try to ignore the fact that a Cena (pronounced "ah chay-na") is filling the void of Assaggio or the fact that the owners have opened some nationally acclaimed restaurants. Let's also set aside the fact that chef Scott Shampine worked at French Laundry and Olea. This could be one of Portland's most exquisite fine dining establishments. From absurdly attentive service to outrageously stunning plate representations, this place nails it. The *asparagi al cartoccio*, prosciutto-wrapped asparagus served crisp with a soft-boiled egg and fontina-truffle fondue, is mind-numbingly delicious. The *molluschi cotti al vapore*, Sicilian-style clams with salami, is both simple and deeply flavorful. The hands-down winner of all is the *branzino arrosta*, whole Mediterranean white fish packed in rock salt and roasted till buttery, most and heavenly. Go now and do as the name says, "to dinner!" ["Put a Li'l Italian in You," March 7]

50 Plates

333 N.W. 13th Ave., 503-228-5050,
www.50plates.com

I don't know how they did it, but these folks (who also own JoPa Northwest Grill out in BFE) pulled out all the stops and have really made a name for themselves. Start off with the Carpet-bagger's Stack (so dykey!), their beautiful medley of fried oysters and succulent medallions of beef filet, a gloriously glorified take on surf 'n' turf. Balance that with some of the city's most exquisite preparations of seafood, a delicious rendition of the classic fried chicken and waffles, and chicken-fennel sausage mac 'n' cheese. You've got it all: good ol' country-style home cooking in a clean, upscale and comfortable atmosphere. The only better way to top that is with an artfully prepared S'mores fondue and a tab that won't choke the butler. ["Portland Is One Lucky Oyster!" Aug. 15] 

JENNY NGUYEN knows a thing or two about eating out. Write her at jenny0080@hotmail.com for tips on finding oral pleasure.