



TODD COOPER

up in one of the world's largest, most complex cities; then, for complicated reasons, Gustavo, mom and two sibs suddenly moved to Grants Pass, a "weird culture" for the boy, but he soon adapted. He found his first job in a restaurant at age 12, washing dishes at the Applegate Lodge, but quickly moved into the kitchen and "started playing with food." He found a fascination and, in himself, "a natural talent" for cooking.

Father and son reconnected, with remarkable results: "My father is a really proud guy and he said, 'Well, if you're to going be a cook, you should be the best cook you can be.'" So he sent his son to Le Cordon Bleu in Paris for 18 months of training; after taking his culinary degree there in 2000, Pardo III enrolled at Portland's Western Culinary Institute because he wanted an "American perspective on cooking and cuisine." He took his second diploma in 2002, served an internship at Caprial and John's, then moved to Eugene to enter a business program at LCC but quickly landed at the Excelsior Café, becoming executive chef at 20, charged with "menu development, ordering, cooking," under owner Maurizio Paparo. But when Roscoe Devine reached out, Gustavo took the Midtown kitchen and installed his vision: "When you have a restaurant, you want to invite people into your home; you want to present a part of yourself." He adds, "With Bel Ami, I just want good food done right." Simple enough, but he had the good sense to enlist a capable crew: "I couldn't do it without [sous chefs] Rivers and Johnny."

Early reports have been glowing: Bel Ami is pretty, the atmosphere welcoming, service crisp and friendly without being pretentious, wine list superb; the bar jumps and the food is plated with style and the freshness of local ingredients — and flavor, blending influences from "Asian and Middle Eastern but with Northwest style." Chef Pardo feels that Bel Ami is entirely new: "We have no part in what has happened in this facility." He says, "We're learning on our feet," but his enthusiasm for his work is infectious and comes across clearly: "It's a passion, it's an art, it's a science. It's making order out of chaos in the kitchen. It's fun."

It might also be the kiss of life for a restaurant that had lost its pulse.

Bel Ami, 1591 Willamette St. 485-6244.

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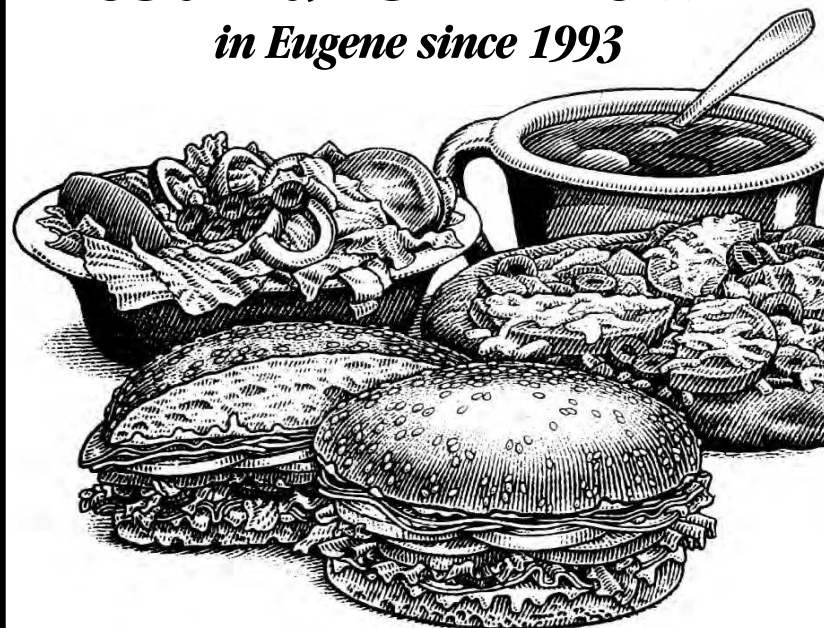
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