



best restaurant

1. **Belly** 291 E. 5th Ave. 683-5896. www.eatbelly.com.
2. **Marché** 296 E. 5th Ave. 342-3612. www.marcheprovisions.com
3. **Café Soriah** 384 W. 13th Ave. 342-4410. www.soriah.com

We've had our eye on Belly since before it opened, and we're still mesmerized. Self-described as "Rustic European Farmhouse Soul Food," Belly has simple, sound, delicious food at great prices. Owner and Chef Brendan Mahaney learned the ropes on the Eugene fine dining circuit, including Marché and Red Agave, and then hosted a supper club before choosing Eugene over Portland for his restaurant. And we're so thankful he made that choice.

The menu changes monthly, following the seasons. Belly avoids the trendy misuse of the word "tapas," thank goodness, but offers plates that range in size: appetizers, small plates and main course entrées. Like Marché, Belly offers French-influenced cuts of meat, such as pork belly, often served over lentils. Other dishes, such as the meltingly tender house specialty, pork shoulder confit, adapt French techniques. Salt cod fritters and gougères, the light cheesy buns popular in Burgundy, are also specialties.

You won't find long descriptions on the menu of particular local sources, but Willamette Valley specialties, such as Seavey Loop apples and hazelnuts in a salad, are plentiful. The confit accoutrements change with the seasons: now served with fall apples and pomegranate juice, spring might bring soused cherries over polenta. November's menu will include duck confit, a chandrelle tart and a petit filet with potato, sweet potato and blue cheese gratin.

Belly stresses its lack of pretension, most recently with an advertisement that stated the restaurant was snouty, not snooty. With entrées under \$20 and most small plates hovering around \$10, the prices are comparable to meals at many dining establishments with more standard — even outdated — offerings.

The wine list is inventive, featuring more European selections than one might expect. For dessert, we wouldn't say no to a pumpkin pot-de-crème. But we'd probably choose another round of the bacon-wrapped, blue-cheese-stuffed Italian plums, because they are just that good.

best new restaurant

1. **Off the Waffle** 740 Van Buren St., 606-4348; 525 E. 13th Ave. www.offthewaffle.com
2. **The Rabbit Bistro and Bar** 2864 Willamette St. 343-8226.
3. **Adam's Sustainable Table** 30 E. Broadway, 344-6948. www.adamsplacerestaurant.com

It's hard to think of a time we couldn't go out and get a piping hot waffle as a late-night snack. But it is really less than a year since the opening of Off the Waffle, Eugene's "confection sensation," as their website states. Since then, proprietors Dave and Omer Orian have blanketed the town with free waffle samples and established a barter system — books for waffles — that appeals to thrifty individuals.

The original waffle house is actually a real house on Van Buren, complete with a billboard with Off the Waffle's iconic image (the red-headed waffle chef who resembles the brothers) and Belgian gypsy jazz piped outside. A second location, a cart in front of High Priestess tattoo parlor, doesn't quite manage to create the same atmosphere (or, at times, freshly made waffles), but its convenience to the university and late-night hours ensures a steady stream of customers.

So what's all the fuss? These small, hand-held waffles are fantastic. Based on the famous sugar waffles from the Belgian city of Liège, they are sweetened with imported pearl sugar that creates a crackly, caramelized exterior and a moist interior. After some experimentation with ingredients and waffle irons, the shop now offers several fillings, including goat cheese with berries, or chocolate chips and banana. Cardamom and pistachios often join the party. Savory combinations, such as the havarti, apple and cinnamon, don't always fare quite as well, especially when the waffle isn't warm enough to melt the cheese.

Off the Waffle sources as many ingredients locally as it can, including flour, farm-fresh eggs, Noris Dairy milk and Wandering Goat Coffee. The popularity of the waffles ensures the shop and the cart are continuously busy, and sometimes the lines get long. Enjoy the music, the books and the conversations around you while you wait.



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