

THE ART OF SOUP

Local restaurants thrill us with winter surprises BY JENNIFER BURNS LEVIN

After so many weeks of cold and rain, hot soup has become staple in our house. So much so that it was verging on boring. So I turned to the best local resource in town: Facebook. Followers of my food blog recommended a handful of usual soups, each worth trying. The African-inspired peanut soup at Barry's is a mainstay for some. Others recommended the zzambong spicy seafood noodle soup at Café Arirang, or the thick and dark mushroom brie bisque at Aquila and Priscilla's.

Drawing from global traditions, local restaurants ladle up everything one might want in a deep bowl. My journey began at Osteria Sfizio, with a bowl of octopus (now calamari) stew in a red wine and tomato base. The soup is enriched with little pearls of fregola sarda, a Sardinian pasta (\$10).

From Italy, I sauntered over to Japan by way of the Whiteaker's Izakaya Meiji, where I found an authentic sukiyaki, a traditional cast-iron hot pot brimming with beef, napa cabbage, bold chrysanthemum leaves, broiled tofu and konnyaku noodles in a sweet and salty broth (\$14).

The taqueria at Plaza Latina recently removed some unusual classics, birria and posole, from their weekend menu, but I was happy to see menudo (\$5.99), the Mexican tripe soup famous for its curative powers, still available on Saturdays.

And then the Mediterranean called at Greek Paradise Restaurant, where they will swirl together their Persian soup (a mixed-bean and barley soup with mint and spinach) and Armenian soup (chicken and barley soup with a hint of spiciness) in a giant bowl for the low price of \$3.95.

But one restaurant, above all these delicious offerings, beckoned like a mythical soup oasis. "Unbelievable," whispered one insider. "I've never had anything like it," a customer said. Another just sighed, "Banana!"

Yes, I had shown up at Rabbit Bistro & Bar, the land of molecular gastronomer and erstwhile executive chef Gabriel Gil. For \$6 a bowl, one can voyage into French-influenced, cream-style puréed soups, changing every few days, all year round. Last week, the menu featured two legume soups: a red wine lentil crowned with shredded duck leg confit, and a silky white bean with enough fennel to lighten up the usual heft, studded with cubes of roasted pork belly and swirled with bacon oil.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by Gil's stockpot skills. In the past year, he's distinguished himself, first winning the Iron Chef Oregon title in Portland, then serving up Oregon specialties at the James Beard Foundation in New York. His creative and sometimes wild flavor combinations have created a buzz, sometimes washish, often baffled, on the Eugene food scene.

But his soups are brilliant, and I don't say this lightly. Rabbit co-owner/bartender Scott Butler agrees. "He rarely repeats them," Butler says. "The last few winter soups, for example, have had apple or banana as a sweetening agent. I tell customers that the soups won't necessarily taste like the list of ingredients."

Butler is absolutely right. Gil's soups are more than the sum of their parts. His inspiration lies in the molecular gastronomy that governs his cooking, a philosophy



Chef Gabriel Gil

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that encourages breaking down dishes into component parts so one can reconstruct them in new ways. Indeed, Gil prefers the margins of the seasons, because they encourage experimentation.

"I start getting antsy toward the end of the season," he says, "and that allows me to make new discoveries." This is reflected in his recent favorite, a beer-based parsnip soup with banana.

Gil's playful side and, I would argue, the best of his cooking, are evident in the creative combinations. He's also not above poking fun at his colleagues. Both Butler and Gil remember a particularly memorable celery purée soup — possibly the only memorable celery purée soup in the history of mankind.

It was inspired by Butler's lunch of Buffalo-style chicken wings.

"Scott often eats chicken wings for lunch," Gil says, laughing, "so one day I made him a soup with some extra celery and the bottle of Frank's Hot Sauce he had in the kitchen." Celery soup in a dark, rich, chicken stock, that is, with a blue cheese froth and a rooster-red hot sauce and butter gel.

"It was like taking a bite and chewing on a chicken wing," says Butler. "He's a soup genius."

I had reached soup nirvana. Even better, especially for those of us without access to gels and foams, Gil has offered his philosophy for readers to inspire their own soups, so we can continue our journeys at home. ■

The Rabbit Bistro & Bar, 2864 Willamette; 541-343-8226; open 11:30am-10pm Mon.-Fri. (closed 2-4:30pm), 5-10pm Sat., 5-9pm Sun.

Jennifer Burns Levin blogs about gastronomic adventures in the Willamette Valley at culinariaeugenius.wordpress.com

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