

EXPERIMENTS IN EXCELLENCE

Big things planned for Agate Alley's new Laboratory BY VANESSA SALVIA

In the three years since opening, Agate Alley Bistro has become a popular but improbable nexus of Northwest bistro cuisine, pub fare and signature cocktails situated in a near-campus neighborhood populated by poor students and perpetual academics. Now, owner Dug Beard is branching out by creating a satellite location he's calling Agate Alley's Laboratory, in the former Shoji's at 2645 Willamette Street.

There's a warmth and a casual bustling of activity in the original Agate Alley location that quickly made it a cornerstone of the neighborhood. "Agate Alley's been doing really well and continues to grow in popularity," Beard says. "We're hitting our stride for what our goal was when we opened. This is a really cool space and we've been wanting to get into catering for a while."

Agate Alley chef Jeff Strom (with experience at the Beverly Hills mansion of Playboy baron Hugh Hefner and locally at Marché) will be the executive chef at both places but ... this will be Strom's "laboratory" to create new and exciting dishes that change weekly.

The small kitchen at Agate Alley prevented it from taking on the catering jobs that people often requested, and Beard sees a renaissance of sorts taking place in South Eugene. Agate Alley is in the company of two other local restaurants, Laughing Planet and Holy Cow, which recently opened second locations in the area.

The new space is on the bottom floor of a building set back a bit from Willamette Street, so it's quiet but still retains a wall of windows that will be fronted by banquet seating. The restaurant will have 20 tables inside plus bar seating, along with five outdoor tables, and will offer both offsite catering and onsite banquet facilities for up to 80 guests. "Parking is never going to be an issue here," Beard says. "We have huge lots in the front and back."

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at our entrees at Agate Alley, it's going to be really comparable to what we will do here but just a little more 'out there,'" Strom says of such dishes as wok-fried Dungeness crab, tri-tip steak in pomegranate-stout marinade or the perennially popular pumpkin enchiladas. "We'll be very eclectic with the menu," he says, adding that the "lab" will still feature "the Northwest vibe thing using local ingredients and a lot of seafood, but there's going to be a lot more different world influences."

Beard plans generous booths of Brazilian purple cherry wood throughout the upstairs and downstairs dining spaces. The lower level will be reminiscent of a laboratory theme, with a more modern style of art and beakers and flasks comprising part of the decor, along with a copper-topped bar and an epoxy floor resembling copper. The upstairs dining area will be "more warm and cozy," he says, with shades of green and purple paint.

"I like to have restaurants with very defined spaces that are different, so people can have a choice of where they want to sit. It's also important to me that the restaurant is comfortable and cozy," Beard says, "so it will definitely have that warm feeling that we tried to create at Agate Alley."

Beard's new "lab" will be serving dinners from 5 to 11 pm Tuesday through Saturday come early May. And if Beard's success with Agate Alley's original location is any indication, this experiment is going to go very well indeed. ■

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