



(LEFT)
CREAM CHICKEN
AND SPINACH
TINY PIES

(RIGHT)
HEIRLOOM
TOMATO,
CART-MADE
BACON, RED
LEAF LETTUCE,
ROASTED
SUNGOLD AIOLI
ON GARLIC
TOAST

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

DELECTABLE DESTINATION

Party Cart turns 28th and Friendly into a culinary corner BY ALEX NOTMAN

For a year, I smelled Party Cart before I tasted any of its menu. Driving home on 28th Avenue, I would roll my window down and stick my nose in the air like a hungry beagle, catching breezes of braised pork mingling with sweet puffs of peppermint ice cream coming from the Red Wagon Creamery cart that shares the Healthy Pet parking lot. The cart always had a steady if small stream of patrons, but for some reason, perhaps due to its less-than-scenic location next to a power grid, I did not patronize the cart until a friend persuaded me to meet her there a year after it opened.

After ordering at the counter of the retrofitted camper, I sat down at one of the three rickety tables, eyeing my fellow diners' dishes: hearty sandwiches, colorful salads, artfully deviled eggs. Then my dish was delivered: a plump, steaming helping of artichoke bread pudding. I couldn't hold each buttery green bite in my mouth long enough.

Party Cart owners (and wife and husband) Tiffany Norton and Mark Kosmicki were tired of working for others and weary of the Eugene scene after years working in the local food industry. "We wanted to go into business for ourselves," Kosmicki says. They agreed on a food cart.

"It's the lowest overhead," Norton says. "The easiest."

"Not the easiest," says Kosmicki, exchanging a glance with Norton. They both laugh.

"OK. The easiest if you're poor," Norton says.

The partners originally wanted to start their culinary venture in the food cart mecca of Portland. Then they began driving around Eugene in search of potential good locales and found that the best spot for them was a few blocks from their home, the Healthy Pet parking lot at the crossroads of 28th Avenue and Friendly Street. "We approached Healthy Pet and planted a seed in their ear," Norton says.

Meanwhile, they were converting what had been the camper's "shell of a kitchen" into a legitimate cooking operation, installing a refrigerator, a sandwich prep



**PARTY CART OWNERS
TIFFANY NORTON AND MARK KOSMICKI**

station, professional baking equipment and a six-burner stove and oven. Peering into the cart's snug interior, there is not one surface that goes unused, whether it's for hanging pans or cooling loaves of bread. They hired a friend and local artist Athena Wisotsky to paint the exterior: some dapper foxes hovering around a plate of steak and eggs. After showing the owners of Healthy Pet a menu and their camper, Party Cart opened its window to business in April 2011.

"The only parameters were it had to be local and food we want to eat," Kosmicki says of the menu. Norton researched local farms, growers and food producers and now they have a list of food vendors that takes 10 minutes to recite, from Laughing Stock Farm (pork, chicken and duck eggs) to the Corner Market (vegetables).

Each week they change their menu according to what's in season and available, whether that's pork shoulder or dollar-a-pound zucchini, and although regular diners can probably detect common threads in the cart's menu — wheat berry, biscuits, braised meats — there are rarely any repeat dishes. When pressed to name one signature flavor, Norton and Kosmicki agree on a bacon and kimchi combo, inspired by a dinner at New York City's Momofuku. The only other constant of the menu is the pricing.

"We try not to have anything over \$10," Norton says.

"Affordable, local organic," says Kosmicki, nodding. "Clean food shouldn't be for rich people."

Party Cart, to their surprise, reignited their love for Eugene. Their vendors and customers were becoming their friends, and one pair of regulars, Emily and Stuart Phillips of Red Wagon Creamery, became business neighbors, setting up their apple-red cart in the same lot. Norton and Kosmicki decided that coffee would be complementary to the sweet and savory business pod and, through mutual friends, contacted the owners of the French press specialty cart Clementines, Beverly Edge and Holly Chedester. They joined the lot in June.

Although Norton and Kosmicki love the cart life, the lack of space can be frustrating and limiting. "I run into Tiffany so much," Kosmicki says, "at least 15 times a day." Looking into the future, they hope to turn their restaurant on wheels into a "brick and mortar" establishment.

On a recent sunny Sunday morning, I returned to try Party Cart's brunch offering with a friend and found myself ordering more than half the menu: zucchini pancakes with huckleberry butter syrup; biscuits with tomato gravy pork loin, tasso and duck egg; fried polenta with bay shrimp, octopus, kimchi, bacon and cherry tomatoes; potato wedges fried in lard. Naturally, everything was eaten. There may be nothing more satisfying than a full belly and looking down at an empty plate with the streaked huckleberry purples, duck-egg oranges and tomato reds of the local land. ■