

Party On, Eugene

PARTY DOWNTOWN CHEFS

TIFFANY NORTON AND MARK KOSMICKI
DISH ON LIFE IN EUGENE By Vanessa Salvia

Tiffany Norton, 33, and Mark Kosmicki, 37, the chefs and owners of Party Downtown, have a hard time settling on a favorite dish. "I really like the lamb bacon," Kosmicki says. "But that's fleeting," Norton adds. "We only had four bellies."

"I love this Brussels sprouts dish," Norton says, pointing to a side dish of roasted Brussels sprouts, beer jam and fried garlic.

Kosmicki suggests the meatballs with pumpkin marina and hazelnut parsley sauce before tossing out, "It's hard to have favorites when we're trying to put our heart and our intelligence into everything."

Norton and Kosmicki seem to be the ideal couple to turn their love of food into restaurant ownership. They've been together nine years and gave up bickering long ago. As in the best partnerships, both have developed personally and professionally since making each other's acquaintance.

"I was a super picky eater until the time I was 20," Norton says, "a vegetarian who didn't eat vegetables." She began working in restaurant kitchens, eventually realizing how good food could be. She was traveling through Eugene on her way to culinary school in California when she and Kosmicki, originally from Omaha, Nebraska, met during his second summer here.

Kosmicki worked in restaurants, starting with Hardee's at age 15 and most recently Lucky Noodle for four years. He also toiled at Creative Growers, a farm in Noti that sells only to restaurants. Still, he considered it simply work. "I never took pleasure in cooking, I guess, until I met Tiffany and started paying attention to it more."

Before opening the cart, Norton worked part-time in a catering kitchen and at the Groundwork Organics farmers market booth. She was Belly's pastry chef and worked at several other restaurants, including Jo Fed's and Bel Ami.

Nearly five years ago, teaming up with Red Wagon Creamery, they opened Party Cart. Unlike many cart owners, they did not want a restaurant. "Then we

realized it actually could be easier if we had a bigger space and had help," Norton says. "We wanted to keep changing the menu and have interesting food."

That they do. Party Downtown opened nearly two years ago. The pair enjoys a following from the cart days and new customers who discover what Kosmicki calls their "quality, organic, tasty food in a situation where you don't have to spend your whole paycheck."

Growing along with their appreciation of food was awareness of the social and environmental impact of food production. Both befriended farmers and farm workers. They also began to appreciate high-quality produce and how other restaurants were using it.

The pair seriously considered moving to the Bay Area or Portland before opening their cart, but they sensed that Eugene was on the upswing. Norton says they decided to build something here rather than take their skills and leave. "We were like, 'Let's stay in Eugene and let's be part of it.'"

The couple strongly believes in supporting local farms. "We really believe in using local products and supporting the community, not just by having, ideally, a successful business but by having deep roots in the community," she says. "We're friends with every farmer that we buy from. We don't need to and we don't care about getting rich off of this restaurant. We want to survive and thrive but we want everyone involved to thrive also."

Their commitment to local extends to their sustainable, biodynamic beer and wine list that is sourced entirely from Oregon and Washington.

Party Downtown is not an everyday dinner destination for most people, with entrees that range from \$12 (for organic beef burger) to \$30 (for the multi-course Kitchen's Choice), and Norton says if people have to make economic choices she would rather they go to the farmers market and buy local produce before eating at her restaurant.

"Our goal is to operate in a respectful way for the future of the planet and for our local community," Kosmicki says. "People don't think of their food choices as something that affects everyone, but it really does." ■



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