

CHARCUTERIE PLATE WITH CROSTINIS



PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

NORTH- WESTWARD EXPANSION

Rain Northwest brings finer dining to west Eugene BY ANDY VALENTINE

For years the building at 1190 City View Street housed a dowdy local Mexican favorite named Nacho's Restaurant, and for years the building blended right in: Complete with faux-adobe walls and a waifish, grinning hombre caricature, the restaurant had everything we'd come to expect of Eugene's longest strip mall on 11th west of Chambers.

Three miles of golden arches, Jacks in Boxes and Fourthmeal fug: The problem here is visibility. On a drag characterized by corporate marketing, where international brands are jammed down our throats like so many flavorless fastfood fries, how best to polish the local gems and let them outshine those big-money lights?

For Tracie Shojai, co-owner of Rain Northwest, a focus on fun is an absolute must.

When Nacho's closed its doors in 2014, Shojai, who owns the building along with her husband, had a difficult time renting out the space. After some deliberation, they decided to open their own restaurant — one that filled an obvious gap in the west Eugene food scene.

"There's really nothing on this side of town," Shojai says. "That was a lot of the impetus, because we live over here. When we designed [Rain Northwest] we really wanted it to be a fun place — my husband and I like going out, and there aren't a lot of restaurants where you can go out and hang out and have a fun atmosphere, and really feel like you're out on the town."

To this end, Shojai and her husband have succeeded. The atmosphere inside Rain Northwest is sleek and welcoming, without all the harsh, square lines of modernity that so often cold-up your bog-standard bistro. A scratch-bar complete with dazzling cocktail list awaits the diner just inside, and the tables are spaced in such a way that the dining experience retains that cozy, urban feel



SNAKE RIVER FILLET WITH BURNT ONION HOLLANDAISE AND BACON CARBONARA

without the tinned-sardine claustrophobia.

When you share a parking lot with an Applebee's, though, atmosphere is just one part of the equation. Rain Northwest sources its ingredients from local farms and vendors, which is all well and good, but preparation is the true priority. Shojai says great care was taken in choosing a refined, experienced and collaborative kitchen staff to bring these quality ingredients to life.

"A lot of smaller restaurants thrive on local and organic, but this is a larger dinner place," she says. "Our chefs have a lot of leeway and rotating specials to work with. They love it because they don't get bored."

This creativity is immediately recognizable after a glance at Rain Northwest's menu. Whether it's smoked pork chops with apples and shallot butter, *coq au vin* with goat cheese polenta, or even a sorrel and roasted beet dip, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more idiosyncratic menu in town. At \$25-\$30 per entrée, it's a pricier, yet more perfect place to paint the town red. Shojai explains that the higher prices are largely due to ingredient costs. She sees sacrificing quality as a big no-no.

"People have given up eating vegetables and trying new things," she says. "They're so used to processed foods. If people are going to invest in us, we want to invest in them. They're making the choice to put high-quality food in their tummies, so we want to fulfill that need."

The foodie sensibility can be lacking in west Eugene, and Rain Northwest may just be a pioneer. So the next time you're slogging your way through the strip, drawn like a moth to the pyrite lights, consider heeding your body's opinion. After an evening at Rain Northwest, I guarantee your stomach will thank you.

Rain Northwest is open for dinner six days a week from 4:30 to 9 pm Tuesday through Thursday, 4:30 to 11 pm Friday and Saturday and 4:30 to 9 pm Sunday. For pricing and rotating specials, visit rainnw.com.