

BELLY BUTTONED UP

Belly Taqueria to Close, longtime restaurateurs plan move to Portland

Our Lady of Carnitas, the muse of rosy-fingered pork, is silent. The Mahaneys are leaving town.

Longtime co-owners of Eugene favorites Belly and Belly Taqueria, Brendan and Ann Marie Mahaney plan to move to Portland in early 2018 to ponder new avenues and do a little more yoga.

As Ann Marie Mahaney continues her education in nursing, husband Brendan will spend the rest of the year cementing a partnership with some familiar faces. Together with two of his former chefs, partners Edgar Arellano and Mikey Lawrence, owners of the Buck Buck fried chicken cart, they plan to open a New Orleans-inspired New American restaurant, Black Wolf Supper Club, in the space that now houses Belly Taqueria at 454 Willamette Street. See our story in Chow this issue.

The team's experience with the Mahaneys' restaurants will surely color the cuisine: Arellano served as sous chef at Belly Taqueria, and Lawrence worked his way up from doing odd jobs like picking plums to managing the kitchen as chef de cuisine at Belly. Both say they consider the Mahaneys family.

"We call them mom and dad. I owe everything to Brendan," Lawrence says. "I'm so thankful to have those guys in my life."

Nevertheless, with Brendan Mahaney's departure, an era will end.

Belly and Belly Taqueria both served as models for casual but urbane dining, relying on our bounteous local farmers' markets instead of trucked-in produce, all priced at under \$20 a plate.

Mark Kosmicki, co-owner of Party Downtown, credits Mahaney and his business savvy for starting the new wave of creative Eugene restaurants that has swept town in the past decade. Belly employed young chefs like Kosmicki's partner, Tiffany Norton, and elevated spirits in a city known to be hard on emerging talent.

"Without him," Kosmicki says, "there'd be no Party, Grit, Membrillo, Mame. He opened the door for the next generation, and he's an inspiration to all of us."

After leaving the Ph.D. program in English at the University of Oregon and serving stints at Marché, Red Agave



BRENDAN MAHANEY

and restaurants in San Francisco, Mahaney says he suspected he could "provide a marriage between fine dining and a less expensive, comfortable spot with seasonal food that was accessible, yet a little rough and tumble" in Eugene.

It wasn't fancy food, but it wasn't mundane family cooking, either. Inspired by British chef Fergus Henderson, the burgeoning Portland dining scene and the greats of California cuisine, from day one Belly's menu showcased

local vegetables and hunky meats of European country cooking.

The décor was as unpretentious and fun as the food. A black-masked Audrey Hepburn gazed out like a queen over thrift store furniture and tchotchkes. She shook when the train passed the building, and perhaps a little, too, when the sound system blasted Run DMC.

Ann Marie Mahaney puts it plainly: "The interior wasn't moneyed or high design. It made people feel comfortable."

A few months after opening Belly in 2008, the Mahaneys were running a popular taco night on Mondays, which came and went and came again, and eventually inspired them to open up the Belly Taqueria in 2012. Visits by food critics Mark Bittman and Jonathan Gold, who tweeted about the "formidable tripe and trotters" in 2011, may have contributed to the restaurant's prestigious James Beard award nomination.

Although he says he talks about the nomination to anyone who asks him what he was doing in 2012, Mahaney credits the success to his favorite cook, wife Ann Marie, as well as her "honest palate," killer *gougère* and key lime pie recipes and affinity for budget-priced European wines.

This marriage of minds allowed for an expansion into the much larger downtown space with a full bar. Belly quickly transformed into a popular venue that never gave up its specialties of the house: boudin sausage, bacon-wrapped figs and relentless pork confit served with an array of seasonal roasted fruit.

After Belly was sold to Diana and Steve Lee in 2015, Mahaney retrenched at the taqueria, relieved to focus on simpler, satisfying fare, since "carnitas and margaritas and guacamole never went out of season."

Though he certainly kept up the experimentation, as evidenced by the St. Patrick's Day green-apple and kale margarita this year, he started thinking about transforming the taqueria into its next incarnation. Gustatory travels to New Orleans came to mind. Soon enough, they were discussing options with Lawrence.

While still in town, Mahaney plans to focus on the pantry menu for Black Wolf Supper Club before gracefully fading into the background. "This transition is dreamy for me," he says. "We get to have a good, creative young chef experienced in logistics tackle the challenge ... and he's providing me with 30-year-old energy past my bedtime." ■

Interested in supporting the new restaurant's Kickstarter campaign? Go to kickstarter.com/projects/1521306200/buck-buck-and-the-black-wolf-supper-club. If they raise \$30,000, the Mahaneys will match the amount.

SLANT

• We are excited to see that Lane County is looking to **embrace the concept of "housing first"** with its proposal to build apartments for the homeless near Autzen Stadium. The \$11.7 million studio-apartment four-story project would be located next to the Lane County Behavioral Health building, providing access to services that are a key part of the housing first concept. Housing first, made famous when Salt Lake City successfully homed its chronically homeless, gets those in need into housing then links them to services. The program has been shown to save money. The county is also considering allowing a car camping similar to Eugene's in Santa Clara along the River Road corridor to the north of the Randy Papé Beltline. You can see an example of just why we need housing

first and support for the unhoused and community members living on the edge in our cover feature this week.

• Creswell voters will soon get the chance to **rethink marijuana sales in their community**. Last fall Creswellians banned them by a narrow margin. Now a marijuana company run by Eugene lawyer-turned-grower Mike Arnold has filed enough petition signatures to put the matter to a new vote. Overturning the city's ban would give his company One Gro what even its execs have said amounts to a monopoly right to sell pot there. We're not opposed to legal marijuana, but Arnold's campaign has a distinct carpetbagger smell. One Gro and its execs have dangled shaky promises of pot tax revenue to sway the city. And then there's that attitude. In July, Arnold snarked that Creswell was "the city brought to you by not one but two dollar stores. Something to be proud of." Be wary, Creswell.

• President **Donald Trump looked up at the solar eclipse without protective eyewear**, something even a first grader

knew not to do. Later that evening, the Donald announced his plan for Afghanistan, refusing to release a troop count or a timeline for the war that has dragged on for 16 years. He took jabs at the Obama administration and of course praised himself highly. Despite his controversial Charlottesville comments in which he attempted to lay the blame for the death of anti-racist protester Heather Heyer on white supremacists and the newly invented "alt left" alike, the president continues to try to shift focus away from his lack of accountability, inability to lead the country or employ a competent staff and his failure to deliver any of his campaign promises (most of which we'd prefer he'd not deliver on). It's only going to get worse before it gets better.

• As summer comes to an end, once again the **banks of the Willamette River are covered in trash** from seasonal campers. It seems like one solution to help solve this problem would be simply be additional trashcans along the bike path. It won't fix everything, but it wouldn't hurt.