

Astoria Stock Co. puts focus on meat

Review and photos by

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Sous vide is among the most elegant and precise ways to cook a steak. The technique includes sealing meat in a plastic bag, submerging the bag in water and circulating the water through a heating element at relatively low temperatures. The slow-cooked results are remarkably even, almost impossibly tender. However, to bother with such a process with anything less than a marvelous hunk meat would be folly.

Enter Phil Spencer and Jake Martin.

For months, the friends have been pounding the pastures, traversing the northwest and meeting with regional ranchers whose livestock they plan to butcher and sell at the Astoria Stock Co.

Construction on the downtown shop is scheduled to begin in January. When it opens — the date is still a bit fuzzy — Spencer and Martin promise to offer “only humanely raised and processed animals from ranches they have relationships with.”

That’s according to the press release that announced a pop-up dinner I attended in mid-December. Its purpose: spread the word about the Stock Co. and spotlight some of those meats.

But first, a primer on Spencer and Martin: They came up together in Seattle kitchens. Since moving to Astoria, each spent time at Baked Alaska. Martin works at Bridgewater Bistro. The Stock Co. will be their first joint venture, their first times at the helm.

The pop-up dinner was graciously hosted by Street 14 Cafe, who’re among the mindful and forward-looking food promoters on the North Coast. Street 14’s staff provided front-of-house



Above: Tartare of Pastured Beef.
Above right: Lamb in Hay Ash with a marmalade of neck, root vegetables.
Right: Chicken Liver Mousse. **Left:** Tagliatelle “En Brodo.”



service. But Spencer and Martin took over the kitchen. Perhaps more than the butcher’s counter, it’s where they’re most at home. The menu was advertised beforehand: five carnivorous courses with service included for a neat and reasonable \$75.

This particular Saturday was frigid and clear. Glowing with diners, twinkling lights and holiday spirit, Street 14 neared capacity both at the two-tops and communal tables. The crowd, made up of supportive friends, family and explorative eaters, bubbled along with a complementary glass of sparkling Chardonnay.

The first course — a Tartar of Pastured Beef with a smoked tallow cracker, whole grain mustard and green finishing salt — ended up one of my favorites. The thin, crumbling, wheaty cracker had a whisp of smoke. The aioli-like mustard was eclipsingly creamy, light on vinegar. The sushi-grade

beef was exquisite, minced into little cubes, painted simply with oil and sea salt. It was taut but melted away like ice on stove. Stacked together, the cracker, beef and mustard made divine little nibbles.

The Chicken Liver Mousse was anything but dainty, almost like a tennis ball. The teardrop puff was accompanied by shaved winter greens and a few modern-art blots of fermented huckleberry, which served the rich, salty mousse well. Heavy, smooth and deep, I marveled at the way fellow diners could eat bite after bite of mousse by its lonesome. Sure, you could have a few little tastes, but after the balancing greens and tangy huckleberry ran out, I’d had my fill. An embarrassment of riches indeed.

The ramen-like Tagliatelle “En Brodo” pork dish was, to me, comparatively unadorned. The consommé broth played

only a single note. The pork itself was delectable, but there little of it. The noodles were approaching something, but in a near-room-temperature liquid, were wanting. A neighboring diner who was gluten intolerant received apples as a noodle replacement. I longed for them — that crisp, broth-sopping sweetness might’ve offered that depth and elevation. And, indeed, if I have one criticism of the meal it’s the want for a few more fruits and veggies. At the same time, I understand the conundrum: the dinner itself exists to showcase meats. A Catch-22, to be sure.

That said, the lamb — along with the beef tartare — belongs with the best animal proteins I’ve had all year. About the size of a business card in 3D, the neatly rectangular slab of lamb was uniformly pink from edge to edge. The sous vide technique afforded astounding, supple tenderness.

The outer edges were rolled in hay ash, which, besides simply importing a smoky flavor, actualized that smokiness in tangible texture. The root vegetables — carrots and beets — were cooked in hay as well, which acts as an insulator. While the softened beets remained their nearly indomitable selves, the carrots assumed much of the hay’s sweet grassiness. It was a take on carrots wholly new and welcome. The lamb and veggies were stacked upon a bed of neck marmalade. Hardly a jam, the sinewy, reasonably sweetened meat referencing pulled pork. Here I celebrated the elemental, earthy power of the beets, for their purposefulness, both in flavor — a vivid counterpunch to the marvelous meats — and presentation. In three colors the beets made for a gorgeous plate — the gold matching the carrots, the pink playing off the tender lamb, and the purple, who mingled with dark marmalade. All together, the colors swirled like a blood orange sunset.

While wholly enjoyable, the dessert of a simple, gram-cracker-y crusted sugar pie with summer berry consommé seemed like a missed opportunity. Could it not have incorporated meat? I mean, bacon’s a no-brainer. And clearly chefs Martin and Spencer know their stuff.

Nonetheless, it was a lovely meal, one that begins with a community of ranches and ends with new community around a table. As one of my final Mouth-related meals of 2016, it was a terrific nightcap.

As for Spencer, Martin and the Astoria Stock Co., rumor has it they hope to offer a few of these coursed, tasting menus at the shop. There’s also talk of premade picnic baskets, wines, cheeses and so-on.

As the dinner proved, the duo’s skills in the kitchen are bona fide. Here’s hoping that success extends to the butcher shop.