

CLOSE TO HOME

# FEASTING ON VENETIAN FOOD AND ORIENTAL ART IN EUGENE

By DAVID CAMPICHE  
FOR COAST WEEKEND

The road from Portland to Eugene is straight and steady. The drive was mostly uneventful, other than outlet malls and large conglomerates of industrial buildings, and, larger yet, traffic clutches, meandering to and fro like herds of ancient bison.

But here, Mother Earth holds a secret: Rich soils driven by wind and flood laid a fertile terrain, eons ago. The first set of Rocky Mountains was whisked away at a rate of about ten one-thousandths of an inch per year. That's dust. That's longevity. That's the soil of the Willamette Valley.

When you leave the freeway, farms and orchards and vineyards speak of rich productivity. One can imagine the Conestoga wagons loaded with pioneers, immigrants really, seeking security. They found it in clumps of rich black earth.

Our destination was Eugene, where our friend Maurizio Parparo owns and operates a small hotel and restaurant, called the Excelsior Inn and Ristorante. It sits but two blocks from the gateway to the University of Oregon. Obviously this, too, is fertile ground.

Little ever seems to go wrong in Maurizio's intimate space. We joined 40 others in a four-course feast featuring the foods and wines of the Veneto region in Northeastern Italy, the region famous for the diamond in the crown outpost, Venice.

We feasted on platters of appetizers: delicate prosciutto, savory soft Taleggio cheese, bruschetta with wild mushrooms and focaccia with caramelized onion. And then moved on to a first course (primo): braised cabbage with pancetta and paté, all the greens from Maurizio's five-acre garden. The main course (il secondo) featured a lamb shank savored in a mushroom broth,



A Japanese 19th-century woodblock print.

slow cooked (sous vide) and then laid on a bed of creamy polenta. Tiramisu (dolce) served in an untraditional presentation finished us off, other than generous tastings of the region's wines with a particularly splendid Amarone,

one of the kings of the reds.

Italians pride themselves on fresh and ripe vegetables. And cheeses and dried meats. And cappuccino and gelato. It was all here in spades. We stumbled to a perfectly appointed room



Lobster ravioli at the Excelsior.

feeling sated and drowsy enough to miss Stephen Colbert at midnight.

Breakfast was a continuation of the night before. The special was a soft scramble with garden kale, country bacon, golden sautéed onions and Kasseri cheese. Spuds were fried perfectly and the fruit bright and ripe in the mouth. Toast was sautéed in olive oil and butter. Laurie, my wife and partner, pledged to hold off any further calories until dinner. I wasn't so sure.

## Art museum

The University of Oregon offers a lovely campus, one overrunning with eager young students. The autumn leaves had fallen into limp colorful piles. Oregon rain began to fall with natural predictability, but above the stone walls, the world flushed mother of pearl in its winter's dance.

The university brags a fine art museum, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, that features the Murray Warner Collection of Oriental Art, 3,700 masterworks collected by Gertrude Bass Warner in the 1920s.

Build it and they will come. Gertrude offered her collection to the university under the condition they build a museum to house it. They did. It opened in 1933 and stands today as a premium collection of fine art, including American, European, and both permanent and

Continued on Page 12

DAVID CAMPICHE PHOTOS