



THE ART OF DINING



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GALLERY Gourmet

Restaurateurs define their style with distinctive works of art.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

WHEN WE DINE out, atmosphere is part of the experience as much as the food. This is particularly true downtown in Portland, where we think of ourselves as an artsy town. Our memories of beloved bygone spots are tied up in the surroundings as much as the food. Brunch at the old **Café Uffa** on State Street meant the long, Modigliani-madonna faces of local painter Nance Parker's colorful portraits gazing down upon us. And remember the velvet Elvises and flying pigs at **Uncle Billy's**?

Today, some restaurants, including the **Blue Spoon** and **Local 188**, use their walls as art galleries, featuring a single artist with works for sale for a period of weeks. Most just hang the art they love.

OASIS

The no-longer-secret getaway for a serene glass of wine and tasty snack on Washington Avenue is the **Drifter's Wife**. Opened last year as a natural wine shop by owners Peter and Orenda Hale, it was reconfigured this year into a wine bar with wine shop at the back. It's been featured in *Food + Wine*, and *Bon Appetit* just named it to this year's list of 50 Best New Restaurants.

The wine bar is spotless and spare, with butcher-block and marble-topped tables and white walls punctuated by a set of framed, dreamy, abstract prints.

"The artist, Kumi Korf, is a longtime



Suitable for framing: Beautifully plated dishes pair well with unique art at Drifter's Wife.



friend of Orenda's," says Peter Hale. "They just seemed to fit."

And they really do fit with the few other carefully chosen accents in the long, naturally lit room, such as the pointy mother-in-law's-tongues plant and an antique mirror.

Chef Ben Jackson's simple, seasonal dishes are the perfect complement. A salad pairs pieces of cooked bluefish with green beans and cherry tomatoes all held together by a bright poblano chile crème fraîche dressing. You can find unusual wines from

around the world by the glass for up to \$15 per glass.

There's no getting around the name **Drifter's Wife**—especially since both Hales are almost always on hand. "It's the title of a J.J. Cale song," explains Alexis, our server.

MINOAN TREASURE

"That image [a striking fresco depicting a young fisherman holding clusters of fresh-caught fish in each hand dominating a wall in **Emilitsa's** dining room] is from the Pal-

HUNGRY EYE

ace of Knossos in Crete,” says John Regas, manager and host of **Emilitsa** (below), the haut-Greek restaurant on Congress Street he owns with his brother Demos Regas. “It’s from around 1500 BC.”

So what’s it doing here?

It’s a replica, painted by “a local artist and designer, Judy Schneider,” says Demos, executive chef. “I like art a lot, and I really liked the art at Knossos when I visited Kriti. I love this picture, and it’s appropriate since Greek cuisine is based so much on seafood. Judy wanted to do it large scale. It’s actually part of the wall, not a separate painting. There are a couple of layers of plaster over the plasterboard and she painted it directly onto the wall.”

“**T**he Regases put up the plaster,” explains artist Schneider later. She painted the image right there in the dining room. When asked if she replicated the wet-plaster fresco technique, she laughs. “It’s acrylic paint—sorry to burst your bubble. I’ve always painted, and I did this painting my own way, although Demo kept on me to make the fish accurate. He pays attention to every detail.”

He sure does. **Emilitsa** is one of the most attractive restaurants in the city. The food is impeccable and beautifully presented. A crisp glass of chilled *assyrτικο* with a dish of *fava*—made with yellow lentils from Santorini and garnished with slivers of onion and toast-



ed pita triangles—are a still-life work of art. The chef de cuisine, Demos’s son Niko, has excellent taste. Are they Cretans?

“We’re Spartans, actually,” says Demos, referring to the arid part of the Peloponnese renowned for its ancient warriors and, these days, for olives.

LOCAL FAVORITE

SINCE 1999, Portlanders have turned to

Local 188 for the artistic, *La Bohème* vibe that reassures us that we live in a city that really cares about art and artists. The food is Latin-influenced, the dining room walls are used as an art gallery offering a changing selection of art for sale. The music is always good.

Portlander Patrick Corrigan’s birds and fanciful images painted directly on the bar and some of the walls are part of the soul of this restaurant and two others—**Sonny’s** and **Salvage BBQ**—also owned by husband and wife artists Jay and Allison Villani. Corrigan’s bird imagery dominates at Local, and his graphic, menu, and website art proliferates at all three.

“I moved to Portland in ’93,” says Woonsocket, Rhode Island native and Massachusetts College of Art graduate Corrigan. “I majored in illustration and did editorial work for years. Lettering has been something I’ve picked up since then. Sign painting has helped hone that skill.

“Allison and Jay opened an art gallery called The Pleasant Street Collective a few years prior to **Local 188**. I met them there and showed my first fine-art paintings. It was the coolest gallery in town. We ended up going on to open Local 188 together, which combined art and art exhibitions with Jay’s culinary skills.”



Judy Schneider’s Minoan fresco replica was painted directly on the wall at Emilitsa.

"I spent around \$400,000 on the collection, but it's insured for \$1M."

-Raymond Brunyanski, co-owner of The Danforth Inn and **Tempo Dulu** (left) with partner Oscar Verest. "Artists include Miami-based [pop artist] Romero Britto, [surrealist painter and sculptor] Joan Miró, and [French ceramicist] Gabriel Fourmaintraux, to name a few. We have also collected many antiques and crafts on our travels to the Far East."



ENDURING CLASSIC

"This is Steve Quattrucci," says Larry Matthews Jr., chef/owner of the **Back Bay Grill** (above) on the corner of Portland and Paris streets, pointing to a young reveler in the long mural that has graced the dining room's back wall since 1993. The artist, Ed Manning, captured the fun of a busy night at the restaurant.

"A few people are real, but the rest are fictional so no one would feel left out. This is Joel Freund, the second owner," he says of a smiling bearded figure. Quattrucci was the first, and Matthews has been the third and current owner since 2002, although he's worked here since the '90s. Freund died of cancer in 2005.

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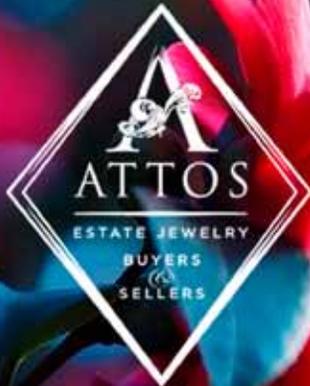
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HUNGRY EYE

The Back Bay Grill is now nearly 30, a dining destination in Bayside before Bayside was cool. The clubby interior and art are part of its history. It was Matthews's wife Kristin Carboni-Matthews, an antique dealer with her mother Peggy Carboni in Wells, who discovered the three "jazz paintings" that are clustered on the wall of the bar at an antique shop in Massachusetts. "Ella Fitzgerald is easy to recognize in this one," says Matthews, pointing, "and this is apparently Coltrane."

Another remarkable painting catches your eye as you head from the bar into the dining room. It's Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters*, his grim depiction of poverty as an austere meal. Only it's not, because these dour peasants are sharing fluted dishes of crème brûlée—a Back Bay Grill special—rather than potatoes.

"It was painted for the tenth anniversary in 1998," says Matthews. "People who recognize the work either love it—or a few find it appalling." ■



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