

[Kitchen aid: James Beard on a platter](#)

'I Love To Eat' has the ingredients and an affable star, but it's cooking lite

By: [Bob Hicks](#)

Published January 18, 2013, in [THEATER](#)



photo: patrick weishampel

Nagle and Elsie, together again. Photo: Patrick Weishampel/Portland Center Stage

Once upon a time in the upscale eating houses of the last century, a dining room was a dining room and a kitchen was a kitchen, and never the flame would meet.

But something was stirring.

As the best restaurants took pains to disguise the existence of the back of the house and serve their customers in a patrician hush, millions of customers at America's bustling corner diners sat at the counter, gulped their grub, and stared eagerly into one of the greatest improvisational floor shows devised by industrial humankind: the clattering, chattering, rough-and-rowdy turmoil of the short-order grill. Who needed radio or TV when you could watch a tattooed guy flipping a flapjack or hear a waitress shout out an order for "Adam and Eve on a raft"?

Once they escaped the slavery of their own home kitchens and ventured into the world of public eating, Americans knew instinctively that a kitchen is a theater. But it took a certain kind of chef/entertainer to bring the high and low worlds of cookery together and create one of the country's favorite forms of show business, whether you were out on the town or entertaining in: Let's all gather in the kitchen! In the new food world baked up by celebrity chefs from Julia Child to Paul Prudhomme to the traveling kitschmeister Guy Fieri, open kitchens and molecular gastronomy and pop-sociological references to "the third place" mix easily with food carts and rib joints and designer pizza palaces.

[James Beard](#), the big and gregarious columnist and cookbook author who happened to grow up in Portland, was one of the pioneers of the celebrity food world. There were other and earlier experts, from cookbook queen Fannie Farmer to restaurant rater Duncan Hines to war correspondent A.J. Liebling, whose almost erotically yearning descriptions of his memorable meals in Europe helped awaken a dormant tastebud on the palates of his eager readers. But Beard seemed an American original: He loved French cuisine but also championed good American regional cooking, from Boston baked beans to Oregon oysters to the hams and hush puppies of the South and the home-baked breads of the Midwest. A wonderful world of food, he assured his readers and listeners, was right here, just waiting to be rediscovered. In the world of cooking, what, and who, could be more innately theatrical than James Beard?

So when [Portland Center Stage](#) announced it was producing a one-man show about this American cooking icon, it sounded like a slam dunk. A great big friendly American figure, a pioneer of what's become Foodie Nation, and a guy with deep local roots: His mother ran a boarding house in Portland, and James became an early young creative: an opera singer (not quite good enough), a Reddie (kicked out in 1922 for "homosexual activities"), a stage actor in the '20s in one of the companies that soon joined to become the legendary Portland Civic Theatre. The family cooked and ate well, and vacationed frequently at Gearhart on the Oregon coast, where years later Beard returned annually to run a West Coast branch of his cooking school.

And sure enough, there's plenty of reason to want to like "I Love To Eat," the play that opened last weekend at Center Stage. First and foremost, actor Rob Nagle fits the gregarious Beard personality to a well-cooked T. That shiny bare skull, that friendly grin, that overgrown shambling gait, that oddball stitching-together of wry New York sophisticate and down-to-earth Westerner, as if he were part Cole Porter and part Zane Grey: Nagle makes Beard as likable and gossipy an evening's companion as you can imagine.

Yet watching this genial, often tasty, yet curiously half-baked production, the thought struck me: When is a solo show a stand-up routine or a character sketch, and when does it cross over and become an actual play?

Several days afterwards I'm still trying to figure out where the actual play is, or where it might be if it existed, because the life and times of this great American gourmand would seem to be littered with dramatic possibilities. But writer James Still seems to have concentrated on nailing down Beard's outsized personality without reckoning on the need for dramatic tension or a narrative thrust – the show's major complication arrives late and feels forced – and that's too bad, because the possibilities are here for a very good show, if only it had a sense of where it wanted to go. As it is, the show is friendly and accomplished and sometimes even witty but also oddly flat: You can feel the little empty spaces where the script pauses for audience laughter and nothing much happens. It's not a bad show. I found myself amused, and entertained by Nagle's stage skills, and interested in what was going to happen next, but in a low-key way: the vitality that could have been there was lacking – and mostly from the script, a fact only partially obscured by some genuinely strange sound effects and a circus ring of stage tricks. If it's going to be an actual play the thing needs shape, and it needs conflict that isn't just tacked on. There should be plenty to choose from: Beard's free-and-easy attitude toward product endorsement, a problem that continues to plague the cooking industry; the rub between his small-town roots and big-city aspirations; the troubles of being a gay man at a time when public acknowledgement might kill his career; even the loneliness-amid-the-crowd that Still's script hints at. Choices need to be made.

That said, if you're interested in the food world or Oregon history or just the fascinating character that James Beard was, this affable little show still has its charms. Director Jessica Kubzansky and scenic designer Tom Buderwitz have whipped up some fun stage bits, including a boffo surprise opening entrance. There are some frightfully silly puppet scenes with Elsie the Borden cow. (Other reviewers have been less kind to these scenes, but I found them just goofy enough to squeeze out a, well, horse laugh.) And Nagle shows off some impressive chops, sometimes literally: He's got real knife skills dicing an onion. I love the way his voice and demeanor become calmer and more centered whenever he's actually preparing food. And I love the way his voice becomes forced and a little manic when he's winging it on camera in his 1946 NBC show "I Love To Eat," the very first network cooking show on American television. Of course he was nervous: Nobody'd ever done this sort of thing before.

One other point: This show seems best when it's at its most intimate: Nagle has a natural easy charm, and he can play a crowd. That makes me think the show would work more congenially in Center Stage's much smaller and blessedly rowdier basement-level Ellen Bye Studio than on the bigger Main Stage upstairs, where a one-person show can tend to get distanced and lost. I understand why "I Love To Eat" was put on the bigger stage. Portland's a foodie town, and Beard's a local hero, and this was a chance to sell a lot of tickets to a relatively low-budget show. It seemed like a smart business move. Unfortunately, it's also an uncomfortable fit.

Bottom line: This ain't the James Beard show we might have wished for. But it's the James Beard show we've got. OK, the soup's a little thin. But if you curb your appetite a little bit and mind your peas and carrots, you might just find it's a pleasing enough meal at that. It's no Four Seasons. But it's a good step up from Applebee's.