

Portland Center Stage serves up a taste of hometown foodie hero, James Beard



By [Marty Hughley, The Oregonian](#)

on January 10, 2013 at 6:00 AM, updated January 10, 2013 at 10:14 AM

[Print](#)

[View/Post Comments](#)

Actor Rob Nagle was starring in a production of "Macbeth" when he asked Jessica Kubzansky how things were coming with "I Love to Eat," the James Beard bio-play she'd direct at Portland Center Stage. He recalls: "She looked at me, cocked her head to the side and said, 'You're 20 years too young and 50 pounds too light, but you could play the role.'"

Patrick Weishampel

Portland native [James Beard](#) revolutionized American cooking and became an international culinary figure, but his continued influence might still be felt most keenly at home.

Says actor [Rob Nagle](#), who portrays Beard in the biographical play "[I Love to Eat](#)," which opens at

[Portland Center Stage](#) on Friday, "There are things he says in the play (and) it's sort of shocking how much it reflects what Portland's become. He talks about simply prepared foods, fresh ingredients, the importance of what's in season. Now he has all these disciples who are out there practicing this idea."

James Still's play, which premiered in 2011 at Indiana Repertory Theatre, features Nagle -- a veteran of the regional theater circuit as well as TV roles -- alone onstage for 75 minutes as a man of great appetites and great skill in sating them. He spoke with The Oregonian before a recent day's rehearsal.

Q. Are you a foodie in real life?

A. I'm married to a foodie and she's encouraged me to become one, too. One of my wife's careers was as a chef and caterer. She was a television exec, and now she's a casting director for a reality TV show, but when she escaped TV for awhile she went to cooking school. I became her guinea pig. I may not have the astute palate that she has, but I can talk with her about food.

She'll have me taste a recipe and try to tell her what's in it. And I found out later that's something Beard used to do. He'd taste a dish and divine all the ingredients, and probably be able to tell you the measurements of everything, even.

When I was offered the role, it was like, "A foodie playing a foodie in a foodie town? I don't care what my agent

says, I'm going to Portland!" I mean, if I didn't take this job, what kind of silver lining would it take?

Q. You're playing the role of a Portland native in front of a Portland audience. To a native such as me, Beard doesn't sound like he has an accent at all. But you're an Oregon native, too. Has that given you a head-start on finding Beard's voice?

A. I was born in Eugene, but left when my dad got a job in Illinois when I was 5. And since then I've lived in Virginia, New York and Los Angeles. So this is really like a homecoming. If the first few years of your life are formative, I hope I can click back into something that sounds authentic.

The way Beard talked was kind of unusual. It's almost folksy, but you definitely don't want it to sound rural. He's speaking with this very European tone -- perhaps influenced by his travels -- but about very down-home things.

Q. James Still's play presents Beard alone in his kitchen. How does it also give us a larger world beyond that room?

A. The play is about Beard and about food, but it's also about choosing what you love and finding your way, and about the influence of parenthood and other things that push us toward what we want. Also Beard is a famous man and a gay man who, while he's out to his friends, can't be out in all of his life, and so the play's also about the struggle against loneliness. It's him making sense of why he's alone and the choices he's made in his life.

Q. Two big trends in culture these days are food as aesthetic pursuit and food as celebrity ladder, if you will. Does Beard deserve credit -- or blame -- for both?

A. That's a good question. What would Beard think of what's become of the food culture - "America's Top Chef" and all that? I have a feeling he'd be thrilled with the interest and people wanting to learn more, but not as thrilled with the depth of the knowledge. There's a whole world that he's preaching that's not reflected in these shows. He'd have a complicated reaction to it, I suspect. I'd love to know what kind of programming he'd have come up with for one of these networks, if he'd known what was possible.

Q. Real acting plus real cooking sounds like real work. How much are you actually making food in the show?

A. There's a little bit of knife work and activity up onstage. I did have to do some training -- thank you, [Greg Higgins](#)! I'm putting together an hors d'oeuvre that Beard used to serve: raw onions, bread, parsley, salt and pepper and fresh mayonnaise. So I'll be making mayonnaise on stage every night.

Q. Will you use your newly honed skills to show off to your wife?

"I Love to Eat"

When: Opens 7:30 p.m. Friday, continues 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays, noon Thursdays, 2 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 3 (plus 2 p.m. Saturday Jan. 19 and Feb. 2)

Where: Gerding Theater, 128 N.W. 11th Ave.

Tickets: starting at \$39, 503-445-3700, pcs.org

A. I have had the fantasy that now she has a sous chef. I always know I'm good with the dishwashing, but now, if she needs a good mayonnaise. ...

-- [Marty Hughley](#)

[View/Post Comments](#)

Related Stories

[Portland Center Stage sets the table for 'I Love to Eat' and other foodie treats](#)

[Beaverton's Eileen Day elected to Regional Arts & Culture Council board](#)

© OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.