

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH...

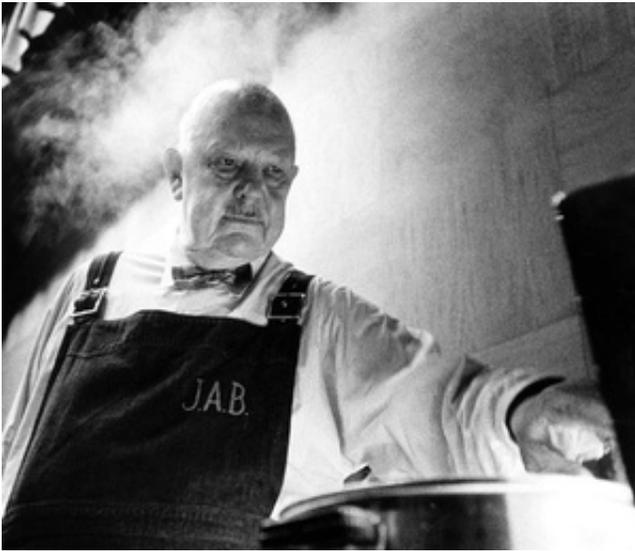
# James Beard On Stage: Five Questions With Jessica Kubzansky

Director of a one-man show about legendary chef James Beard talks about resurrecting Portland's culinary godfather.

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By [Zach Dundas](#)

Image: [Ken Steinhoff and the James Beard Foundation](#)



**You're an LA-based director with lots of world premieres and Shakespeare on your résumé. Why come to Portland to run a solo act about a dead food personality?** *I Love to Eat* takes place on one of the last nights of Beard's life, basically in the salon of his mind. The character is having his last hurrah, expressing all the things he's loved in life. And James Beard was such a lovely, indomitable, larger-than-life personality. He loved connection and was highly verbal—he had five phone lines in his house, because he always wanted to stay in touch with *everyone*. The opportunity to explore that love of life with James Still, a great playwright, and Rob Nagle, a great actor, is very exciting to me.

**Beard was born in Portland. He hosted TV's first food show, wrote many books, and arguably jump-started our now-dominant foodie culture. Is it harder to do a show about a native son?** It's definitely different than it would be in Indiana, the other place this play has been produced. He wears a robe, so should it be a Pendleton robe? But Beard belonged to everyone. I am one of those people who loves the Food Network. All that began with him. Cooking is entertainment now, and chefs are revered as pop stars, and none of that would have happened without James Beard.

**And yet, as a semi-out-of-the-closet gay man in midcentury America, the real Beard must have experienced some darkness. Does the play go there?** Our character talks about never really being *in* the closet, either. But there's a subtle but powerful loneliness to Beard. In the course of his life, he had friends all over the world, and he was truly passionate about being famous. But there can be an ironic gap between how you're loved in public and how you're loved in private. Our character has some mysterious interactions with offstage characters and talks to someone who makes him very sad.

**What are some of the challenges of directing a single actor?** With larger ensembles, sometimes you cast that difficult person because you believe you can get a performance and it's worth it. That would be a disaster with a one-man show. If you're not in a groove with that person, you shouldn't be in the same room.

**I understand your "Beard" will cook real food on stage. Complicated?** It's going to take a shocking

amount of repetition and physical discipline to make it look like he's been slicing those onions every day for 5,000 days. Rob and I have worked together before, and I know he has the stamina for this. He's not physically as big as Beard was, but I don't think you could be and do this play. You're onstage by yourself for 80 minutes. This is one of those times when people have no idea what it takes to make a play.

[Portland Center Stage presents I Love to Eat Jan 8–Feb 3.](#)