

Review: Portland Center Stage's "I Love to Eat"

The one-man show about famed Portland-born chef James Beard is well-staged and excellently acted—if not fully satisfying.

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By [Jonathan Frochtzwaig](#)



Image: [Patrick Weishampel](#)
Rob Nagle as James Beard in *I Love to Eat*

It is a strange-but-truism of humans' strange-but-true psychology that the most sociable people are also often the loneliest. Famed chef James Beard was one such walking contradiction, at least as represented in [Portland Center Stage's new production about the Portland-born epicure](#). The one-man show, written by the Los Angeles-based James Still and directed by L.A.'s Jessica Kubzansky, is a well-staged and excellently acted—if not fully satisfying —“character” study of a man who was known for his clubbiness, but for whom countless dinner parties never quite stuck to the ribs.

First, for the nonfoodies among us (this reviewer included), an introduction: James Beard, born in Portland in 1903, helped come up with the concept of distinctly American cuisine, was America's first television chef, and gave his name to “the Oscars of Food,” the James Beard Foundation Awards. Beard was a dyed-in-the-wool social animal, a consummate host, a razor-sharp wit, an unpretentious cook (his motto was, “good food, honestly prepared”), and a zealous sensualist. He was also a failed opera singer, an out gay man in a closeted society, and, as already stated, a rather lonesome person; it’s in bringing these darker, compelling facets of Beard's life to light that *I Love to Eat* is most valuable.

The play takes place in Beard's apartment in the middle of the night as Beard, unable to sleep, does what he does best: entertain us, the audience, as midnight-snack guests of sorts. We learn about our host not only through his free-associative monologues, but through conversations he has on his multiple, incessantly ringing phones (“I fear the day the phone stops ringing,” Beard tells us); flashbacks to his TV show; and even a bit of absurd but well-played ventriloquism. Starting by reducing the fourth wall to rubble, playwright Still continually surprises his audience with creative ways of keeping one guy talking for an hour and a half interesting.

That guy, Eugene-born actor Rob Nagle, gives an impressive performance, laudable not just for its endurance

but for its perfect pitch. Nagle’s delivery of his comedic dialogue, for instance, is spot-on, employing pregnant pauses and arched-eyebrow looks as visual drum stings. In [our interview with her](#) last month, director Kubzansky said it would take “a shocking amount of repetition and physical discipline” to make Nagle look as at ease in the kitchen as Beard would have. Their hard work has paid off: In the part of *I Love to Eat* when Nagle prepares canapés live, he appears just as in his element as Beard would have been—producing, in addition to delicious-looking hors d’oeuvres, the play’s finest moment.

While Nagle’s acting is outstanding, the script he’s working from has some problems. The conversational format of *I Love to Eat*’s dialogue, while admirably naturalistic, doesn’t provide much more biographical information about Beard than his Wikipedia page does, and the play doesn’t delve deeply enough into some of the most intriguing aspects of Beard’s life, from an alluded-to unhappy childhood, to his transition from singing student to chef, to what it was like to be out of the closet in a deeply homophobic time. (Admittedly, that might not be fair, as Beard himself apparently didn’t treat his sexuality as very important.) That said, it’s difficult to give a 360-degree picture of anybody—much less a public figure—in the limited format of a one-man show. *I Love to Eat* reveals more of Beard than not, and the play especially succeeds in examining the voracious—and perhaps insatiable—appetite for human connection that gnawed at the man behind the apron.

[I Love to Eat runs at the Gerding Theater at the Armory through Feb 3.](#)

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