

# Big gay Beard: 'I Love to Eat' invites you to the home and heart of James Beard

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**By Julie Cortez, PQ Monthly**

He dearly loved food, entertaining, travel, his home state of Oregon, and fame — and James Beard would surely have relished the star treatment he receives in "I Love to Eat," a one-man play presented by Portland Center Stage through Feb. 3.

To some, the Portland-born Beard is a gastronomic hero for sharing his knowledge and appreciation of high-quality, seasonal, down-to-earth food with the masses via the first television cooking

show and his numerous cookbooks. To others, he is merely a name on a plaque declaring a fine restaurant's chef the winner of the James Beard Award, or the large, grinning bald man on the back of an old food-splattered book on someone's shelf.

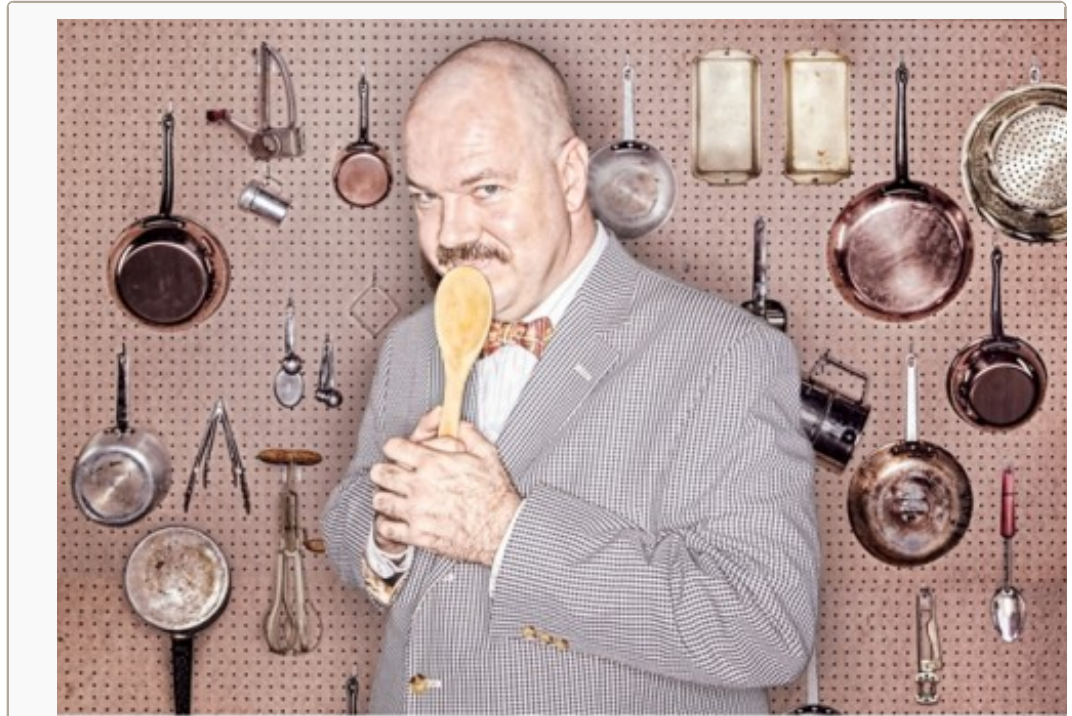
Playwright James Still fell into the latter category. "I Love to Eat" is not the result of "some long-held obsession with cooking through all of James Beard's cookbooks," he says, but of Still's incredulity upon reading a footnote about Beard hosting television's first foray into cooking shows all the way back in 1946 — 17 years before Julia Child made her onscreen debut.

"That took me down the rabbit hole of trying to investigate whether or not it was true," Still says. What he discovered was an "incredibly complex, tender, funny, outrageous, interesting man who really did blaze a trail in terms of how we think about food.... I think it's impossible to read just a tiny bit about [Beard] and not be intrigued — and delighted and mystified."

The playwright interviewed people who'd been close to Beard, some for 30 to 40 years. Friends, folks he'd mentored, his editor — "people who knew him and cared so much about him," and who shared Still's growing impression that Beard "deserves his day in the sun."

"They each had a slightly different version of who he was," Still says. "In the end, he was a bit of a mystery."

One thing that was never a mystery to those in his life was his sexuality. Born in 1903, "He knew he



Rob Nagle stars as James Beard in "I Love to Eat," by James Still. Photo by Patrick Weishampel

was gay from a very young age,” Still says.

Yet, catering to an audience of cookbook-buying housewives in the ‘50s and ‘60s, Beard had a public persona and brand to uphold and protect.

“He didn’t live in the closet,” Still observes, “but he didn’t live as an out gay man.”

The adored chef was lonely — he struggled in his quest for true, reciprocated romantic love — but he was open with his friends and comfortable in his own skin.

“I never got the sense that he pretended to be something he wasn’t,” Still says, adding that he was struck by how at ease Beard seemed in his rotund figure — he once took his shirt off for a magazine photo shoot — and by “how graceful he was and how in his body he was.”

If Beard had been ashamed of being gay, Still insists, “he would have walked through the world in a different way.”

As Beard, actor Rob Nagle radiates the grace, confidence, wit, and joie de vivre Still describes, and director Jessica Kubzansky has helmed a production that feels like an intimate conversation with the gregarious chef — despite the fact that attendees are treated as a couple hundred house guests Beard has “conjured” — as Still puts it — into his New York brownstone in the middle of the night.

“We are, in fact, his company,” Still says of the audience. And he hopes it is a happy audience, as the significance of bringing the play to Beard’s hometown is not lost on the playwright. (“I Love to Eat” premiered in Indianapolis in 2011 and was picked up by a theater in Washington, D.C., 2012). Still expects Beard’s fellow Portlanders will be “the most generous and the most critical” in their appraisal of his work.

He just hopes his “great, fierce love for Mr. Beard, and for theater” shines through as strongly as Beard’s plus-size personality does.

*“I Love to Eat” opened Jan. 8 and runs through Feb. 3 at Portland Center Stage’s Gerding Theater at the Armory. For tickets and information, visit [pcs.org](http://pcs.org) or call 503-445-3700.*