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PORTLAND STAGE REVIEWS



REVIEW: A FEAST FOR PORTLANDIA'S SOUL – PORTLAND CENTER STAGE'S "I LOVE TO EAT."

by Faddah Wolf • [Reviews](#), [Theatre](#) • Tags: [bio](#), [biography](#), [chef](#), [chefs](#), [cooking](#), [Cooks](#), [culinary](#), [Daniel Meeker](#), [food](#), [foodie](#), [James Beard](#), [James Still](#), [jeff cone](#), [Jessica Kubzansky](#), [John Zalewski](#), [PCS](#), [portland center stage](#), [Rob Nagle](#), [Rose Riordan](#), [television](#), [Tom Buderwitz](#), [yum](#)

[*Author's note: as a disclaimer, I should say that when I went to opening night celebration last friday of **I Love To Eat** at PCS, based on the life of Portland native & self-proclaimed epicure, James Beard, PCS and their sponsors poured on the charm, and the local Oregon wine, extra*

hard, with a gigantic gastronomical exhibition by premiere Portland Chefs (*Philippe Boulot, Greg Higgins, Caprial Pence, Gabriel Rucker and Corey Schreiber*) and their respective crews, for anyone who paid the price of admission. I'd like to be able to tell you that my theatrical journalistic integrity and opinion in this piece was not swayed in the least by these offers of some of the most excellent food, beer and wine sampling one can get in this region. I'd like to be able to tell you that, but... oh hell — who am I kidding? It is a sad day when I must bow my theatre critic head and admit even I can feel my integrity caving at the thought of mouth-watering duck confit salad with pomegranate seeds and fresh-grated parmesan, or a dungeness crab salad on a milk bread roll with some *Argyle Charonnay*, but there you have it. So I think I don't effuse too much due to all that food and wine going to my head, but I'm warning: they may have gotten to me. Still, worth the read below. And I do heartily recommend that if you do go, have table reservations at your favorite downtown dining establishment for immediately before or immediately after — it's the only way to survive this ode to gastronomy without drooling all over your seat. Onward...]



photo: patrick weiskamp

James Beard (1903 – 1985) was Portland before Portland

was Portland (or *Portlandia*, for that matter). Larger than life, big and ebullient (as the on-stage character says in his hilarious ostentatious fanfare entrance, with Portland rose petals falling on him from the rafters — “Moderation? *I’m against it!*”) filled with an epicure’s passions (and as this show reminds us, he preferred “epicure,” an American English description, to the continental French words like “gourmand” and “cuisine”), a proto-Portland-foodie with the robust girth and appetites to match it, the quintessential host, world traveled and educated, yet with a love and dedication to his own very American, and yes, even home-grown local Portland flavor, openly gay, at least to close friends — Beard was, in a much less enlightened time, a trail blazer (pun somewhat intended) for many things we now consider common in our happy “**Keep Portland Weird**” city.

In **James Still’s** play, *I Love To Eat*, getting its West Coast Premiere at **Portland Center Stage** (oh why did it not World Premiere here in his home town? — the shame!), we meet Beard in all his over-the-top glory, in robe and silk pajamas to start, later in his trademark apron embroidered with his initials. We watch, rather enraptured, as he regales us as soirée host extraordinaire, hearing delightful dinner party gossip stories, such as his friendship with culinary queen, Julia Child (“I’m an inch taller than her, she’s an inch more famous than me.”), his travels from boyhood digging mussels on the Oregon coast with his mother, to forays into Opera around Europe and Theatre, before landing in his career as Chef by starting Hors D’oeuvres, Inc. in New York with friends, and lots of great re-living of his career on NBC as the first ever televised cooking show chef. You feel like you’re sitting down to drinks and canapés with the best of dinner party raconteurs.

It would be easy to think of this play as a bit of fluff —

after all, the subject matter is a twentieth century chatty and oft witty Portland chef, who but those in our local foodie community might have any interest? That would be the case, if it weren't for the plain fact of his voluminous contribution to the culinary form, almost as big as his own robust form. Just a quick search at the [Library of Congress](#) or own [Powell's Books](#) shows dozens of cooking volumes bearing his name, plus the fact that he was the progenitor of all televised cooking shows and, perhaps, our very "foodie" American culture.



Nagle as Beard with Friend.

Ably leading us through with (*ahem*) relish, is Rob Nagle as Beard, fully embodying these very large shoes, not just in girth, but in Beard's very wide and full embrace of life. Nagle triumphantly gives voice and body to the vigorous display that was Beard, both in his larger than life character, and even in quieter reflections on his regrets, or the later revealed reason Beard is entertaining us, his guests, and being so self-revelatory (won't give that spoiler away, you'll have to go see for yourself). He delightfully reveals to us, like so many surprise courses in a dinner party, Beard's many life stories and quirks,

including having his phone number publicly listed and not just gladly, but with eager gusto, looking forward to taking calls from *anyone*, from friend Julia Child to a woman trying out his recipes (more on that later). There's even some fun puppetry involved with his TV show sponsor's iconic trademark character. He also performs a neat trick in the latter part of the performance of continuing to deliver the stories from the script while actually cooking one of Beard's recipes on stage, for real. Talk about pulling off a culinary hat trick.

Director **Jessica Kubzansky's** work here with Nagle and her ensemble of designers is as open and generous as portions Beard himself would serve. It is worth mentioning that Tom Buderwitz's kitchen set here will have any Portland foodie insanely envious and wanting to immediately go out and cook something (a scenic accomplishment Beard himself would encourage). And particularly of note is sound designer John Zalewski bountiful work of an aural landscape filling out the one set with the various ringing phones, enchantingly kitschy early TV fanfares, and the ever-present ticking of a kitchen timer.

Also, at least in Still's idealized version here of Beard, we see an utterly different chef than what we've seen of late on the 24/7 cable TV cycle, or for anyone who's ever had to work under a kitchen demagogue. As part of his love of getting random phone calls from nearly anyone on his very open unlisted number (perhaps this was Beard's pre-Internet version of replying on Twitter), Beard has an ongoing serial chat with a woman in the midwest who has tried one of his recipes for an important dinner party only to have it turn to disaster. Nagle's Beard cajoles and coaxes her through, punctuating it with his primary cooking credo: "Now, did you have *fun*?" Compare that very folksy mentoring of an utter stranger through the

culinary storm to the cut-throat reality television chefs we get too much of today on **Iron Chef**, **Chopped**, or Mr. **Hell's Kitchen** himself, **Gordon Ramsay**, all of whom would sooner have you turn in your apron and take a nationally televised, humiliating walk of shame than instruct you in the difference between poaching and blanching.

One other personal note — while it's easy to fall into fan-boy-ism over Beard and consider him final authority on anything American food-related, I must say he was wrong about **his prejudice against sourdough breads** — dead wrong. Maybe back then, there were not as many ways to keep sourdough starters vital. That's all I'll say on that.

One mention of how local politics might creep into even a simple, fun production like this, the gala opening of this show at PCS, with four top Portland chef serving up dishes post performance, was sponsored by the foundation to lend Beard's name to a public project for food booths, a restaurant and a new office tower at the downtown west entrance to the Morrison bridge, the **James Beard Public Market**. On the one hand, this might be a worthy tribute to our local Portland original chef, a foodie paradise of culinary booths, with our new Mayor, Charlie Hales, commissioner Dan Saltzman and other local luminaries and restaurant owners on the board; on the other hand, I wonder how much of this is using Beard's name and the good will generated by this production for further projects from the Portland Development Commission and local developer **Melvin Mark Development Company**, whether or not the infill is necessary. We already have a very thriving **Food Cart business culture here in Portland** — will this project be in support of including this already existing culinary economic segment, or will it price them right out of that area? It is nice, however, that during the production run, **PCS is partnering with Oregon Food Bank**

to take canned or boxed food donations to feed the hungry, something James Beard would certainly approve of, keeping everyone well fed.

By the way, that trick where it's part of the script for Nagle as Beard to actually cook something on stage? If you can afford it, try and get seats in the front row. Those who did got to sample the recipe on completion, paired with the perfect vintage. Beard himself would ask you as his cooking protégé, "Did you have *fun*?" Go, Portland, bring your taste buds and your fiercely local wild hearts. You will have fun, you will.

Portland Center Stage presents ***I Love To Eat***, based on the life of Chef James Beard, written by James Still and directed by Jessica Kubzansky. Starring Rob Nagle as James Beard. Scenic Design by Tom Buderwitz, Lighting Design by Daniel Meeker, Sound Design by John Zalewski, Costume Design by Jeff Cone, Casting by Rose Riordan. Runs January 8th – February 3rd, 2013, Tuesdays through Sundays, evening 7:30 performances Tuesday through Saturday, matinee Saturday and Sunday performances at 2:00 pm. Tickets are \$59 – \$65 evening performances, \$39 – \$45 for matinees, student youth tickets are \$25 with valid I.D. Tickets available through the ***PCS Web Site***, or by calling the box office at (503) 445-3700, or e-mailing boxoffice@pcs.org.
