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Chef Vitaly Paley

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A TASTE OF PORTLAND'S UNIQUE EATERIES

BY ADAM SAWYER

THANKS TO A COMBINATION of geological events and climate, Oregon's Willamette Valley has become one of the most renowned growing regions in North America. Located at the valley's north end, Portland was (and still is) a city that embraced creativity and independent spirit, while simultaneously being one of the most affordable metropolitan areas on the West Coast.

Roughly two decades ago, when the "farm-to-table" movement was establishing its roots, culinary talent from around the globe began flocking to the area to take advantage of its bounty. The city became the eye of a culinary storm that swirled around the Northwest. By the time the clouds cleared, a relatively quiet river town had stepped onto the world food stage.

Here are just a few of the remarkable chefs and restaurants that helped define Portland's food culture and exemplify what makes it so unique.

Rick Gencarelli (Lardo, Grassa)

As a chef, Rick Gencarelli got his chops by working at premier restaurants on both coasts. In 2009, the lure of Portland's food scene was too strong for Gencarelli to resist. Through his wife's recommendations, he decided that a cart would be the best way to get his name out in the community and showcase his talents without taking a major financial risk. He opened the Lardo food cart in 2010, serving wildly creative and flavorful sandwiches anchored by old-world techniques. Gencarelli had an inkling

that savory pork-based sandwiches would be a hit and a great introduction to the swine-loving people of Portland. He was right.

Two years later, his first brick and mortar location opened, eventually followed by his handcrafted pasta restaurant, Grassa. It's quite possible that Chef Gencarelli would have won the hearts and stomachs of Portland had he gone straight into a restaurant, but that cart-based handshake he chose to offer the city first was the perfect introduction. lardosandwiches.com, grassapdx.com

Anh Luu (Tapalaya)

After the Vietnam war, Anh Luu's parents moved to New Orleans, where she was born and raised in a thriving Vietnamese community. The Asian-Cajun cuisine that Luu grew up with was not fusion, but an evolved sub-species of the already ethnically collaborative genus, Creole.

After losing everything in Hurricane Katrina, Luu's parents moved to Portland to start over. She followed her parents, as well as her interest in the culinary arts. She landed at Tapalaya and eventually moved up to the role of Executive Chef. In 2017, Luu purchased the restaurant, which has become a Portland favorite. Sourcing the best local ingredients, Luu puts out palate- and genre-expanding Asian-Cajun offerings like Boudin Sausage Eggrolls, as well as straight creole and Asian standards. tapalaya.com

Vitaly Paley (Paley's Place, Imperial, Headwaters)

If there were a Mount Rushmore dedicated to the culinary legends of Portland, strong arguments for and against at least ten chefs would dominate the selection committee's deliberations. But no one would deny the inclusion of Vitaly Paley. The James Beard Award-winner is not only responsible for three of the city's most highly regarded restaurants, but he's helped groom many talented chefs who have gone on to become shining stars.

While cooking in France, Paley received a basket of the best tasting morel mushrooms he had ever encountered. Paley asked what part of France the mushrooms came from. He was somewhat perplexed but even more intrigued when the answer came back, "Oregon."

At the time, Paley was looking to push his cuisine forward by being close to the source of his ingredients. The more he researched, the more the Willamette Valley looked like it should be home. Paley moved to Portland where he and his wife opened Paley's Place. The rest is history. paleysplace.net, imperialpdx.com, headwaterspdx.com. 🍄



In *Unique Eats & Eateries of Portland, Oregon*, culinary and travel writer, author and guide Adam Sawyer tells the story of a city's ascension to culinary greatness through the stories of the people, places and events that helped it happen. The book details a food scene bookended by the epicurean proving grounds of the food-cart pods and James Beard Award-winning, chef-driven restaurants. In between, endless volumes of culinary genre are explored: Brewpubs,

neighborhood eateries, dive bars, wine bars, hyper-local, hyper-seasonal, vegetarian, vegan, baconarian and beyond. To order *Unique Eats & Eateries in Portland, Oregon*, go to reedypress.com and click on "bookstore," email the publisher at books@reedypress.com or call (314) 833-6600.

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