

The New Castagna

As I sat waiting for friends to arrive at Castagna last week, I couldn't help but eavesdrop on owner Monique Siu's conversation with an inquisitive couple as they took their seats a few tables away. Siu explained that the large artichoke painting has always been there, but the addition of rich slate gray banquettes and matching walls added warmth to the dining room of this 10-year-old landmark Portland restaurant. The dining room's makeover coincides with a recent chef change, as former chef Elias Cairo left to start up Portland's first USDA certified salumeria, Olympic Provisions, slated to open in a few weeks. His replacement, Matt Lightner, has the Portland food community abuzz with his modern Spanish-inspired cuisine.

Lightner recently returned to Portland after eighteen months apprenticing at Chef Andoni Aduriz's Mugaritz in San Sebastian, one of the world's most renowned restaurants. His menu at Castagna, featuring contemporary preparations like Dungeness crab cooked sous vide and Northwest oysters dusted with chilled horseradish "snow," reflects this training, as well as his passion for seasonal ingredients.

When we asked the chef to come by our table to explain his menu, he began by mentioning that most of the greens and many of the vegetables come from "out back," as he pointed toward the back door of the restaurant where he keeps a garden. Next he went down a list of farms that he buys produce from, calling the farmer by first name. When we asked if he was dreading the onset of winter, he explained that on the contrary, he looks forward to the crisp sweetness of sunchokes, celeriac, and turnips—root vegetables that flourish in the cold soil.

Throughout the course of our dinner, it was clear that Lightner is fluent in the techniques of molecular gastronomy—his focus at the reinvented Castagna is in applying these skills to local seasonal ingredients.

Castagna
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