

# Eating on canvas



Photo: J.M. Simpson

CHEF WILLIAM: His food creations are alive. Alive!.

Babblin's Chef Mueller wants you to taste his portraits.

by Ken Swarner

Apr 10, 2008

A locally celebrated chef told me recently that cooking had more to do with craftsmanship than art.

“Saying it is art sounds hoity-toity to me,” says this chef. “Cooking is a teachable skill — you can teach anyone the basics of cooking like you can teach them woodworking.”

If the term art must be used, he's willing to call cooking a folk art.

“It's something that is passed down through the generations,” he says.

But for every Clementine Hunter or Henry Darger there is also a Dali.

Tacoma Chef William Mueller, owner of Babblin' Babs Bistro in Proctor may be Tacoma's surreal artist. To him, the plate represents the blank canvas that he paints with unconventional flavor combinations and textures rooted more in his mad scientist brain than anywhere else.

Where a plate of lamb shank with rosemary pan jus, goat cheese mashed potatoes and vegetables represents folk art, Mueller's blueberry soup with chicken and garlic, hand-spun caramel infused with sake and wasabe over vanilla ice cream, and chipotle pasta stuffed with black beans, cilantro, jalapeño and walnut pesto is what? abstract, surreal, weird?

## **Out with the dishwater**

“My specials are just those — special, one-of-a-kind recipes, most likely never to be repeated,” Mueller writes on his current menu. “Sad, but very true.”

This morning’s Riesling waffle made from pulverized grape seeds with smoked salmon in crème fraiche dill ends up tomorrow’s memory, making room for corn crepes with goat cheese on apple puree.

“I try to break all of the molds,” Mueller says, which, apparently, includes practically ripping up the recipe cards once he’s made his point on the plate.

“I am always searching for fresh ideas — I’m never satisfied,” he adds. “What I create here is a place for older people to feel hip and young, and for young people to feel vibrant.”

If the Riesling waffle fails in that mission, Mueller hopes Guinness beer with chocolate pretzels and Marion berries does the trick.

“My goal is to create the foundation of what Tacoma’s cuisine should be.”

## **Inside the chef’s head**

It’s 2 a.m. in February and Mueller wakes his wife, Shannon, from a dead sleep. “It’s not right — the flavors on the plate won’t work — they won’t work,” he tells her.

It’s a few days before his next monthly “Evening with the Chef” dinner and Mueller’s brain won’t take a break. Neither the brain nor the body gets much rest. Mueller and his wife run the whole show — no other staff. They prep for the next day well past midnight, and then return by 5 a.m. to start a new day.

By 4 a.m., Mueller has reworked his five-course, \$65-a-plate meal while Shannon literally slept for both of them.

Mueller admits he rarely tastes his concoctions under development.

“What I taste in my mouth won’t be the same for someone else,” he says. “Each person is different.”

Like most artists, Mueller creates within a process. He dreams up an elixer, writes it down, mixes the ingredients, makes his wife, a friend, customer (somebody) try it, gains feedback, repeats, more guinea pigs, refine, and rewrite until it’s ready.

“I do all of that in the same day,” Mueller explains.

For Mueller, one thing usually leads to another. Finding a Cabernet grape seed flour

producer gave him inspiration to create meals like the waffle mentioned above, as well as a pasta he drizzled with Chardonnay roasted garlic oil tossed with oven seared sea scallops and a couple of cracks of Tellicherry peppercorns.

“The grape seed flour gave me visions of pasta, brownies, dressings, infusions with Asian flavors, and even a roux,” Mueller says. “(I like) the endless possibilities that I can capture with just one product, anywhere from dessert to dinner, and people won’t know what it is.”

Mueller’s visions continue to grow — both inside and outside his head.

“What I am doing culinary-wise is truly boundless territory for my creativity,” he adds. “It’s like a child running free with no constrictions and the world is truly mine, and I respect that with every dish with true infusion of flavors and authenticity, and I am careful how and where I place them together.”

Maybe the Salvadore Dali reference above isn’t that far fetched.

Dali once said, “You have to systematically create confusion, it sets creativity free. Everything that is contradictory creates life.”

## **Last word**

With artists, of course, come art critics, therefore I give the last words to Volcano food critic Jake de Paul.

“Every time I dine at Chef Mueller’s operating room he responds with a circus act of science fusion. Wild sockeye salmon with a tapenade crust, chicken Monterrey garnished with African date salsa, wild sea scallops with maple mango chipotle glaze are not just clumsy amalgamations of flavors and styles, but honestly innovative and sensible fusions. The fun, however, is when Mueller runs out of an ingredient. He peruses his locally sourced ingredients. Out of the tapenade? Salmon arrives with a horseradish-and-potato crust. Out of African date salsa? Bam! Sun-dried cherry and rosemary marmalade reduction. He’s quick and inventive.”

[**Babblin’ Babs Bistro**, 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday-Friday, also 4-8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday, 2724 N. Proctor St., Tacoma, 253.761.9099]