

Everything Old Is New Again

A restaurant steeped in the classical tradition keeps an eye on the future

On a Monday night in early summer, the mellow sounds of jazz and murmuring voices fill the air at the Back Bay Grill. For three years, many patrons—music lovers and gastronomes alike—have booked selected Monday nights at the popular Portland eatery to enjoy the restaurant’s jazz series. Chef Larry Matthews began the series during Maine’s shoulder seasons, hoping to lure new customers with not only great food but the area’s best jazz musicians as well. The combination proved irresistible to regulars and a happy surprise to the uninitiated.

On this night, the dining room and bar are both filled. A birthday celebration is taking place at a table of four, two mothers are spending time with their college-age daughters at a four-top nearby, and there is an informal family reunion at a table for eight in the back. Closest to the jazz trio are four twenty-somethings apparently celebrating nothing more than good food, good music, and good times. Several “BBG die-hards,” as one restaurant veteran calls them, are arrayed along the stainless-steel-and-wood expanse of the bar. The Back Bay Grill is one of the few places in town where you can reserve a seat at the bar, which many long-standing customers prefer to table service. Often their first request, even before ordering a cocktail, is for Chef Matthews’s famous truffle-oil popcorn, a unique and sublime bar snack that somehow can never be successfully replicated outside the restaurant’s walls.

The Back Bay Grill has held an important place in Portland’s fine dining history since the city’s culinary renaissance of the 1980s. Local restaurateur Stephen Quattrucci opened the restaurant, which celebrated its twentieth



FEAST
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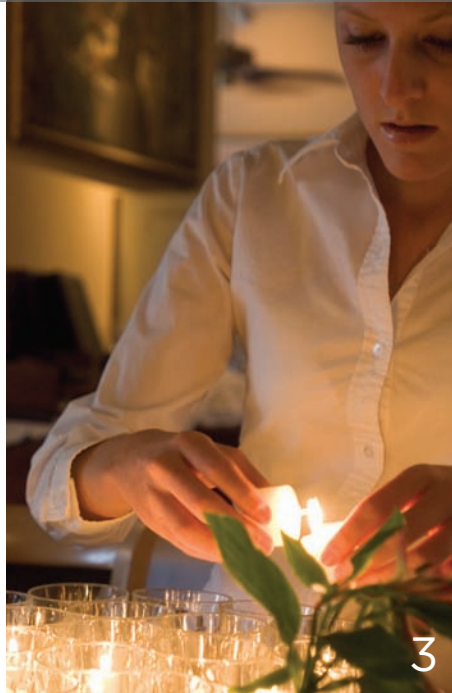


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anniversary in April, in the Victorian-era brick building in the city's Bay Side neighborhood. Along with bartender and maitre d' Joel Freund, Quattrucci built a bistro that immediately found its niche in a city hungry for new dining experiences.

Matthews joined the Back Bay Grill kitchen staff in 1995. He received his formal culinary training at Newbury College in Brookline, Massachusetts, but his real education began at the renowned White Barn Inn, where he worked under executive chef Gethin Thomas.

During his tenure at the White Barn, Matthews came across a profile of the Inn at Little Washington in Washington, Virginia. The Inn's restaurant is one of the country's most celebrated, consistently receiving the highest accolades from *Zagat Survey*, the James Beard Foundation, and *Travel + Leisure* magazine, among many others. Thomas told him that "if the White Barn is a five, then that place is a ten." From that point on it was Matthews's goal to work there.

Chef Thomas used his connections to get Matthews a place in the kitchen at the Inn at Little Washington. "That experience taught me all about uncompromising standards," he says. "It was either the very best or nothing." In the end, however, he

(Clockwise from top left) 1. The perfect Cosmopolitan makes it way to a waiting diner. 2. Maitre d' Adrian Stratton is perfecting the art of customer service. "Consistency of food and service year after year is what sets us apart," he believes. "It's still the biggest challenge we face every day." 3. Getting ready for the evening's service. 4. A Back Bay Grill menu staple—house-cured gravlax from Brown Trading Company in Portland—on a bed of grilled fennel and marinated cucumber salad with chive oil. 5. Regulars to the Grill often prefer to eat at the bar. 6. "I really don't try to reinvent the wheel," says Chef Matthews. "The food here is classic; you won't see something on the menu until we know we can do it well."

missed his home and his fiancée, and after a year Matthews moved back to Maine.

Shortly after returning, Matthews began working at the Back Bay Grill. In a few months, he worked his way up to sous chef, and in 1996—at the age of 24—he was appointed head chef by the new owner Joel Freund, who had since bought the restaurant from Quattrucci. Matthews soon began to change the menu—not drastically, but incrementally over time. In the years that followed, the young chef focused on creating a more sophisticated menu and atmosphere, riding the wave of Portland’s burgeoning culinary scene.

It is important to Matthews that his food is prepared to the exacting standards that he learned at the White Barn and the Inn at Little Washington. Equally important, however, is maintaining an atmosphere that is relaxed, even casual. “I will always try to balance sophistication and simplicity,” he states. “Both in the front of the house and in the kitchen.” Matthews is intent on preparing food that doesn’t scream *look at me*, but that demands a diner’s attention by its elegant presentation and extraordinary quality.

In 2001, Freund decided it was time to pass the restaurant on to Matthews, who had been not only his long-time colleague but also his friend. They celebrated the deal at the prestigious James Beard Foundation in New York City, where Matthews had been invited to showcase his talents. The entire staff went and paid tribute to Freund and his accomplishments.

Behind the scenes, the Back Bay Grill is noted for its relaxed, low-stress work environment. Matthews rarely raises his voice in the kitchen, motivating his employees by example rather than intimidation. Says maitre d’ Adrian Stratton, “We have an amazingly strong staff working together in a really comfortable atmosphere. There aren’t a lot of huge egos here, just a bunch of people working to get it right every time.”

At 35, Matthews is the oldest person working at the restaurant, save for the twelve-year-veteran dishwasher, Franco Tucker, who is 61. Among the youthful staff, the rate of turnover is surprisingly low—a rarity in the restaurant business. Part of the staff’s satisfaction might be tied to Chef Matthews’s innovative business practices. He has financed recent improvements not by dramatic budget tightening but by opening “house accounts” with selected regulars. For \$1,000 up front, diners can get \$1,500 in restaurant credit—an idea that he tried on a whim and sold out with a few phone calls. Matthews’s next project will be replacing the wood tabletops with stone, which will allow him to stop using white table linens, reducing the environmental impact of laundering and saving the restaurant more than \$30,000 a year.

Like dog years, restaurant years are time compacted. A restaurant that survives ten years is thought to have had a good run. Entering its twenty-first year of operation, the Back Bay Grill has proved its staying power. Credit the classic food, unwavering attention to detail, superb service, and an eye toward the future for its enduring success. **MH+D**



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