

James Beard

A Presentation for Tri-Met Westside Light Rail Opening

By David Milholland, 1997
as James Beard



Wearing my apron, the scent of fresh-baked bread and sweet butter as my culinary aura, I become James Beard. My father John came out to Oregon at age 5 with the late-arriving 1860s pioneers and my Welsh-born mother Elizabeth made it to Oregon in the late 1880s. Now there was a strong-headed, opinionated woman, addicted to theater and the art of entertaining. By 1892, she was running the residential Curtis Hotel just down the street at SW 12th & Morrison and by 1896 she had her own place – the Gladstone. Her long-time chef and business partner, Canton-born Jue Let, commingled the culinary skills of East and West under her demanding tutelage. He taught me “taste memory,” my trump card ability to recapture thousands of memories of eating, right back to my childhood.

Mother sold the Gladstone to pay off father’s debts just before I was born right here in Portland at the dawn of a new century – 1903. I was raised in our home at SE 23rd and Salmon, which became a boarding house for “friends of the family.” Mother and Let also used it for a catering business for her wealthy friends up in the West Hills. We were never as at home, however, as we were at our Gearhart place, just north of Seaside. For 3-4 months each summer we lived from the native berries, fresh oysters from our grand old friend Harry Hamblet’s beds at Shoalwater, and the Pacific razor clams I loved to dig up and cart home – all the great bounty of an Oregon summer.

I was considered a daredevil swimmer. I’d swim out beyond the breakers. People used to tear their hair out because I was willful – but I knew my own strength. I learned outdoor skills from my father those summers...he’d take me mushroom hunting – oh those fresh chantarelles we’d bring home by the basket – and trout fishing. Both my parents got me all excited about camp cooking. I later parleyed that into my *Complete Book of Outdoor Cookery*.

Life at the beach seemed to be one continuous picnic. The salty tang of a sea breeze or the fresh sharp scent of the pines seemed like nature’s spice for the food we were eating. Those busy days on the Oregon coast left their mark on me, and no place on earth, with the exception of Paris, has done as much to influence my professional life.

Back in Portland, mother would often take me on her shopping expeditions, down to the Yamhill Street markets. The vendors never failed to recognize Elizabeth Beard as a discriminating, valued customer. What I learned from her about shopping was worth a college education. We got only the best onions, bacon, and cheese unavailable in most of the U.S. – Brie, Camembert, the great Tillamook Cheddars. Mother would snag me a slice of Emmentaler Swiss, a reward for helping carry her packages.

I'd come home to Let's ladyfingers – as light as a ghost's footsteps – or baked walnut halves with a dribbling of melted butter. The neighbors thought we spent all our money on our stomachs, and I guess they were right.

Mother was never very formal in her entertaining, and her uninhibited style may sometimes have been thought shocking. But no one left our house without feeling happier. Like theater, offering food to people is a matter of showmanship, and no matter how simple the performance, until you do it well, with love and originality, you have a flop on your hands.



Is James Beard Tweedledum or Tweedledee? __ 1930

I got into theater very young. My biggest role on the Portland stage was Baron Reghard in Andreyev's *He Who Gets Slapped*, later a hit movie with Lon Chaney and John Gilbert, who along with Billy Gable (you probably know him as Clark) were groomed on the Portland stage. I went south to Hollywood, and played in Cecil B. De Mille's *The King of Kings*, but I quickly knew tinseltown and I weren't a fit. Back in Portland, I played Tweedledum and Tweedledee with my friend John Emmel in the 1930s Rose Festival productions of *Alice in Wonderland*.

I finally found a home in New York. I told my dear friend Hattie Hawkins, it is "Old Lady Gotham, a stern, gay, fascinating, lecherous old wench – learn to love her and forgive her faults – cherish her gifts and moods."

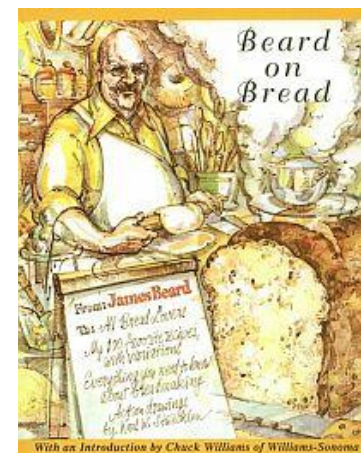
It took me years to find my true vocation. 22 books later, I'm recognized as the father of American cooking. Still today, my followers honor me with the culinary showcase in my former residence in the Village. Allow me to share a short passage from one of my favorite works, *Beard on Bread*.



"Good bread is the most fundamentally satisfying of all foods; and good bread with fresh butter, the greatest of feasts. Good bread and butter go together. They are one of the perfect marriages in gastronomy, and they never fail to cheer me. I enjoy soft sweet butter on paper thin slices of fresh bread to go with my tea, or on slices of beautiful sweet bread or hot brioche bread. For a special treat I relish the taste of bread and butter with a slice of raw onion, or a hearty, crusty slice of Italian or French bread with butter and a bit of cheese...

Then there are bread and butter sandwiches. The bread can be white, whole wheat, rye or any kind you like, but it must be sliced very, very thin and spread very thickly with sweet butter."

You get the picture, I lived for food, and food came to life wherever I wandered. My friend Julia Child said: "In the beginning there was James Beard."



I know much better. **I owe my culinary soul to my sweet inspiration, my mother Elizabeth Beard.**