



SYBARIS BISTRO

An Eclectic Pacific Northwest Restaurant

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

When I think of the best dining experiences in Oregon, one name always stands out—Sybaris Bistro. Owners Janel and Chef Matt Bennett have truly created something special in downtown Albany. Housed in a historic industrial building at the corner of First and Washington Avenues, Sybaris Bistro brings the finest flavors of Oregon to the table, blending eclectic inspiration with classical preparation and innovative techniques. The restaurant's monthly changing menu, upscale yet comfortable atmosphere, extensive Northwest-focused wine list, and full bar make every visit an exciting culinary journey.

One of the things I love most about Sybaris is the commitment to making everything from scratch. If Chef Bennett can't make something better than a commercial product, only then will he use it (think Beaufou mustards and Nueskes bacon). But even ketchup? Yes, even that is made in-house. Every day, they bake fresh bread, and thanks to Chef Bennett's background in pastry, desserts receive the same meticulous attention to detail as the entrées. French chocolate, pure Hawaiian cane sugar, and cream without additives ensure that every sweet bite is worth saving room for.

I have followed Chef Bennett's career with great admiration, especially when he was invited to cook at the prestigious James Beard House in New York City. Representing the Pacific Northwest, he and his team took extra care to transport the flavors of Oregon to the East Coast—literally. Coolers of Willamette Valley ingredients flew with them while their luggage was mailed to the hotel. That level of dedication speaks volumes about their passion for food. When they returned to the Beard House for the “Willamette Valley Native Tribute,” it was a landmark moment—the first time Native American foods were featured at the esteemed venue. Partnering with The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, the event was a huge success.

On my most recent visit to Sybaris, I was eager to savor a meal inspired by Chef Bennett. My anticipation was rewarded with several dishes that exceeded my high expectations.

I started my evening with a Tuaca Side Car, skillfully crafted by Janel. The blend of Tuaca Brandy, Cointreau, fresh lemon juice, and a hint of orange juice was perfectly balanced and set the stage for an incredible meal.

For my first course, I tried the Green Garlic-Nettle Nage with a 141-degree egg topped with caviar. As Chef Bennett explained, the dish begins with puréed green garlic and nettles, which



are carefully blanched to remove their sting. A little olive oil and chickpea broth round out the nage, and the egg is cooked in an Emergency Circulator (a countertop sous vide) at precisely 141 degrees. The result? A silky, earthy dish where the creamy egg yolk melds beautifully with the vibrant greens, punctuated by a pop of salt from the caviar.

Next up was the Cream of Asparagus Soup. This light, creamy soup had a hint of lemon and a velvety texture that made each spoonful luxurious. Chef Bennett revealed his technique—sautéing onions, Yukon Gold potatoes, and butter before covering them with cold water and simmering for an hour. A handful of fresh spinach or parsley, blanched for brightness, is blended in along with roasted buttered asparagus. The potato lends the dish its signature silkiness, while a touch of heavy cream at the end elevates the richness.

One of my favorite dishes of the evening was the Greek Spiced Lamb Meatball. It was served in a tomato-lemon-mint sauce with orzo, spring vegetables, and crumbled feta. The flavors were beautifully balanced.

The key, according to Chef Bennett, is dried mint—fresh mint just doesn't impart the same depth. He shared a personal connection to this dish, recounting how the Greek community in his hometown of Detroit inspired him. For 35 years, he had chased the memory of a particular tomato-lemon-mint sauce. The breakthrough? Portland's Smith Teas provided a mint tea that finally gave his sauce the bold, aromatic quality he sought. The result was a perfect marriage of flavors that honored his culinary journey.

The Rice Crispy Crusted Rockfish was another standout. Pan-fried in canola oil with Three Crab's Fish Sauce and paired with sweet chile sauce, coconut sticky rice, and grilled asparagus, the dish had an incredible crunch from the Rice Crispy coating. Typically, the dish includes bell peppers, but as someone who isn't a fan, I appreciated the kitchen's willingness to customize. The bright green sauce accompanying the dish was a vibrant blend of watercress and sour cream, adding a fresh counterpoint to the rich, crispy fish.

No meal at Sybaris would be complete

without dessert, and I was thrilled to end my evening with the Sybaris Chocolate Hazelnut Cake. This flourless chocolate cake features whole roasted hazelnuts, hazelnut crème brûlée, dark chocolate mousse, and a striking dark chocolate glaze. The secret to its glossy black finish was a unique black cocoa that was introduced by the French Pastry Team in 1993. It is still available via special order. The final touches—whipped cream, hazelnuts, and pearl sugar—added the perfect balance of crunch and sweetness.

Each time I dine at Sybaris Bistro, I remember why it remains one of Oregon's most exceptional restaurants. From the meticulous attention to ingredients to the thoughtfully crafted dishes, every element of the experience speaks to the passion and artistry of Janel and Chef Bennett. Whether you're a local or visiting the Willamette Valley, Sybaris Bistro is a must-visit for an unforgettable culinary adventure. ❖