

■ GOING OUT Restaurants & Theater

PARAGON IN THE PEARL

By Chad Walsh

Most restaurateurs are inspired by either imagination or vision. Those who rely on imagination quickly learn the benefits of spontaneity and improvisation, adopting the quirks they're born with and trusting that their clients will adopt them too.

Conversely, there are increasing numbers of restaurants where imagination is trumped by vision, or—in simpler terms—capital. Visions are carefully planned, sometimes over the course of many years, and every detail is tended to so the entire enterprise hums harmoniously.

Paragon is the result of a vision, though not one in Portland. The first Paragon opened in San Francisco in 1991 and has been born again three times since.

And while Portland's Paragon respects the Pearl's industrial history, it hasn't any of those quirks that many diners find so endearing in their favorite eateries. In fact, the place is so lacking in quirks that it's almost without personality. If that's true, what can be seen as lackluster was in fact carefully planned. And what could be worse than a carefully planned lack of luster?

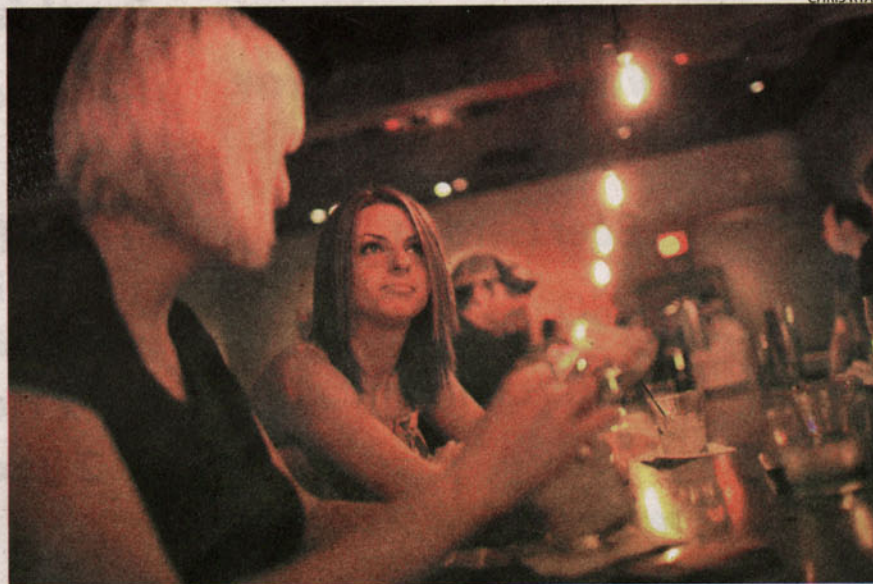
Paragon's personality may be restrained, but that doesn't mean it has no soul.

It may not be that old, but it's been around long enough, and it has finally settled comfortably into the role of neighborhood corner bar. It has atmosphere. The low lighting in the bar after the sun has set is romantic and intoxicating. Upon

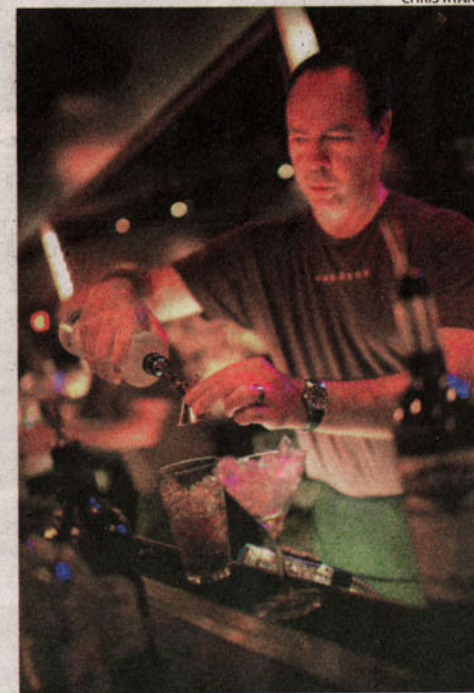
each tabletop rests one lit candle. Hanging from stems above the bar is a series of clear incandescent light bulbs through which curved filaments warmly glow. Across from the bar is a fireplace. And behind the bar are three enormous mirrors, which reflect the light bulbs and the candles and their phantom twins cast on the surrounding

windows. It's quite dazzling, like treading water in a school of fireflies.

Living behind Paragon's long wooden bar are at least 100 bottles of spirits, and a bartender who'll pour you one of many house-made berry-infused vodka cocktails. There's also a great selection of Old World whites and reds, and an enormous selection



Friends drink in the warm atmosphere at the bar on a Saturday night.



CHRIS RYAN

Bartender Bob Bruner mixes up one of his signature drinks, a Rosalita, a tequila spiced with pineapple, strawberry and jalapeno pepper.

CHRIS RYAN

Every Sunday, 4 p.m.-7 p.m., Toshi Onizuka and Mariano de Orbegoso play a strange hybrid of traditional/shred flamenco music (Mr. Onizuka actually uses a wah-wah pedal to augment the sound of his acoustic guitar). If you're lucky, the help will get in on the act, too: Paragon employs a waitress who sometimes sings with them, and sings so beautifully that diners literally forget to eat, listening with their mouths open and the forks full of food hovering in the air.

of Washington and Oregon wines. If you're a pinot noir lover, you're in luck—there are almost 20 from which to choose.

And not surprisingly, this being Portland, eight of the dozen taps pour delicious Oregon microbrews, with Trumer, Guinness, Stella and the oddly chosen but populist domestic Bud Light rounding out the drafts.

As far as edibles, while the menu is not vegetarian-friendly, it's not unfriendly either. There are plenty of salads, including a simple plate of delicate greens with a subtle emulsified Champagne vinaigrette, as well as the retro classic iceberg lettuce wedge with blue cheese dressing. There also are a couple of meatless pastas or, if you're feeling particularly nostalgic for your childhood, grilled cheese and tomato soup.

But it's the pescetarian to whom Paragon most caters. Starters and entrées

include calamari, black mussels, grilled mahi mahi, sautéed steelhead and a fresh catch of the day every day.

Yet perhaps the best way to enjoy Paragon is on a lazy summer Sunday afternoon, looking out at the corner of Hoyt and 13th, with the green trees in bloom, when there's just enough daylight to kill most of the lights inside, with a draft (I recommend the Hopworks Czech Pilsner) and that great American classic, the cheeseburger—our first, finest and perhaps only contribution to the world of street food. And the Paragon burger is *good*. In fact, while most burgers in the Pearl inspire little more than shrugs, Paragon's, even in its simplicity (quality ground beef, cheddar, sauteed onions and aioli) is perfectly cooked and is practically perfect in every way.

Vision, with all its clean and economical lines and its hushed modern moods, isn't perfected until it grows a little older and worn. Paragon has arrived at that place. But vision can't make you a good hamburger. That requires intuition.

Paragon

1309 NW Hoyt St.

503-833-5060

Lunch: 11:30 a.m.-4 p.m. daily

Dinner: 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m.,

Sunday-Wednesday;

5 p.m.-11 p.m., Thursday-Saturday

www.paragonrestaurant.com