

oo

*ripe—Where We Come From*

by Matthew Stadler

In summer 2001, a young couple in Portland, Oregon, Michael Hebb and Naomi Pomeroy, built a table in their rented bungalow on Northeast Failing Street. It was a clever contraption with long, hinged pieces of plywood that unfolded from the wall to rest on old wine crates. It took up their whole front room and seated about twenty. They invited twenty friends to dinner, which Naomi made from whatever ingredients were fresh that day. The friends who came to eat left something in return. The first night they left chairs, but after that they usually left money.

Michael and Naomi called their gathering “family supper.” Family supper was a lot of fun. There was no advertising, so you only went if you knew someone who’d gone before. Like many small-scale DIY projects, it was lively and storied. Dishes were washed by drunk guests in a plastic kiddie pool in the front yard. The five Weber grills Naomi used caught the back porch on fire once. One night, Benicio Del Toro came; he was down the street filming *The Hunted* and wandered over,

wondering what the noise and laughter was all about. Michael and Naomi's newborn daughter, August, slept on the table during supper and got passed around to make room for the salad, or some other platter of food. Some of this is true, and all of it was exciting, and family supper quickly grew into a food business called "ripe."

And here a sticky word enters the scene, often portrayed as the snake in the garden: "business." When and how did this table become a business? It grew into a huge one—an internationally recognized group of three restaurants with nearly a hundred employees—that ultimately collapsed under the weight of debt. It also grew into a kind of art project, a deliberate incubator of local culture that used the restaurant economy to support everything from sculptors and architects (commissioned to design and build the restaurants) to dance companies, fire-breathers, DJs, and presenting organizations (given venues, fundraising dinners, and food and drink).

Ripe even had a writer in residence—me. Having long admired family supper and marveled at ripe's support of artists, I wondered how the restaurant could help invigorate the civic life of literature. I asked Michael and Naomi to take me on as "writer in residence"—none of us knew what that might mean—and their "yes" was, in essence, a way to throw the question back to me: Show us how dining together can help the city develop a robust literary culture.

The first answer, the simplest, was the back room (which took its name from the alleyway catering kitchen into which ripe had stuffed

family supper, and where the back room events would take place). The back room took the common table of family supper and added a deliberate conversation. As host, I would invite a writer I particularly admired, and we'd eat together, fifty or so of us, and then we'd all have a conversation with our special guest. Things got fancier pretty fast. We added live music, bottomless wine and brandy, and a program of commissioned publications to round out the experiment. You're holding one of the results in your hands.

Michael and Naomi made it easy to jump over the cliff of these good intentions and find out what lay at the bottom. That summer of 2005, we floated on the warm winds of ambition and Michael's special talent for enlisting the optimism and resources of a huge community. Ripe would cook and run the house for below-cost, just to get things off the ground. Winemakers would donate a few cases for each event, contributions to a worthy cultural experiment. An e-mail from Michael and Naomi was all it took to fill the fifty seats. Soon the back room was up and ready for whichever special guests I cared to book.

I had some writers in mind, but music and the visual arts are also key elements in the literary mix; that's my belief, anyway. And so two essential collaborators joined our experiment that summer—a musician named Curtis Knapp, who chose musical guests to play, live, at each event, and Stephanie Snyder, the director and curator of Reed College's Cooley Gallery, in Portland, who would select visual artists to be special guests at their own back room events.

By August we were ready to begin. I decided that food and politics should be our first subject, so we invited the region's most trenchant urban-planning critic, Randy Gragg (who was then just about to leave town for a Loeb Fellowship at Harvard), and a local chef and political activist named Ron Paul, to discuss the ways that Oregon's land-use politics had planted the seeds for a unique food culture in Portland. At the back room, we would be feasting on Oregon foods. What part did the state's visionary land-use laws play in setting that table?

It was a beautiful August evening. The loading dock/alleyway onto which the back room opened had a small herb garden and enough room to sit or mingle, so we started the evening drinking out in the sunshine. There was superb wine (ripe had catered a reception for the governor of Oregon the previous week, and the crowd hadn't made much of a dent in the wine supply—we were the beneficiaries), and we listened to the drum, bass, and piano improvisations of the Watery Graves while the cooks sweated in the heat of the stoves.

I like wine and good company, and so my duties as host quickly slipped out of mind. Hosting, I soon discovered, is an essential skill that makes this kind of social gathering really work. Enabling a community conversation—giving people a chance to think together in public—is a lot like “leadership,” as Anne Focke describes it in her marvelous essay, “A Pragmatic Response to Real Circumstances,” which the back room commissioned in January 2006 (and which is included in this volume). She quotes Lao-tzu: “A leader is best when

people barely know he exists, not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worse when they despise him ... But of a good leader who talks little when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say, “We did it ourselves.” A good host provides the right, simple arrangements, the timing, and the conversational irrigation to get the whole, rich organism of a group growing and blossoming into its finest flow-  
(ers.) At the first back room event, I learned the many ways a host can enable, or disable, an evening.

A host should grant inclusion. Everyone who comes should be welcomed, individually if possible. A host should give permission, handing over the resources of the space explicitly to the guests; at the back room, that means telling everyone they can sit wherever they like; it means introducing guests to the bar and to the servers; it means letting them know what the plans are. A host should pace the evening, and a host should also say goodbye.

At family supper, Michael and Naomi took care of many of these things through the ritual of a welcoming toast, and we adopted that custom for the back room. Pacing was another story. At family supper, the kitchen drove the night. When the food was hot, everyone ate; dessert came out when it was ready; when the food was gone, it was time to say goodnight. At the back room, the kitchen was just one spinning wheel in an interlocking arrangement of intricate parts. The musicians played as the cooks cooked and the guests arrived. Too much drinking too early could sink the ship. As host, I had to check

in with all these parties and run the wheels in unison, toasting to bring us to the table when the time was right.

I believe it is better to eat and drink first and have a conversation later. No point rushing through talk to appease an empty stomach. So after the toast, fifty-plus people sat down, elbow to elbow and knee to knee, to pass huge platters of food down the long tables for our shared meal. A common table is among the richest places to begin a conversation with new friends. Dinner means meeting new people, and hoping they won't hog the salad or main course. Quite a bit gets communicated in reaching to snag, say, a dwindling bottle of wine, or working up the courage to ask if anyone else wants the last of the buttered long beans.

At the first back room I literally forgot that there was more to the evening than that. The food was so good, the wine so plentiful, that I settled into a long conversation with four men who were starting their own fashion company. Imagine my surprise when the chef, Troy MacLarty, came over to ask if I wanted to start the conversation before or after he brought out the dessert. The conversation!

At the back room, we sit down to talk with our special guest when the after-dinner brandy and dessert are being brought to the table. It can be a confusing time for the guest. Full, a little drunk, and often deep into some topic with table neighbors, they are beckoned to come sit up front with the host and start a conversation with all of us.

We don't ask them to read out loud or recite. The back room is a chance to think together—not to listen to recitations of previously composed bits of genius; not to sleepwalk through a rehashing of old questions; not to hear sound bites or the parroting of received wisdom. To think together in an open-ended conversation is a rare skill, a lot like reading—real reading—the sort of reading a good book demands. At its core, the back room offers us a chance to read our guest, slowly, keenly, hungry for the textures and surprise of thinking together. It is thereby, I think, a fundamentally literary pursuit (regardless of the guest's specialty: literary, visual, **musical** or what-have-you).

On our first night we didn't really get there. As surprised as I was to be reminded of the conversation after dinner, the assembled crowd was more surprised. When I called their attention to the front and asked Randy Gragg to explain the concept of a "food-shed" (it's like a watershed, but it describes the region of farming that drains produce and foods into a metropolitan center), it felt like I'd called the kids in to do their homework. From there to Senate Bill 70 and the impact of Portland's urban growth boundary was a long traverse for a very long evening. We lost a good half of the crowd before we were through.

That was the beginning of our education together. The back room became a habit for a couple dozen regulars, and within a month or two we had built up our stamina and acquired some skills. (My skills as **host**, not least of all.) The pace of the evenings became more

relaxed and expansive, while newcomers to the group took the cue of the hardy regulars. Most evenings that fall, we went the extra mile together, keeping our guests well into a fourth hour.

The food got better and better. Troy MacLarty (who as of this writing runs the kitchen at Portland's storied Lovely Hula Hands) started cherry-picking rare ingredients from the ripe larder, special orders that somehow didn't sell out at the restaurant. One night we arrived to our \$36 prix fixe back room dinner (bottomless wine, brandy, and tip included) to find he was serving us individually stuffed quails. And that was just the main course. (Troy "left for other opportunities" soon after that, and I can't help but blame the quail.) By December, when Naomi took over, the events were selling out for the food alone. It didn't seem to matter who we programmed.

Naomi's first back room was organized around my novel, *Allan Stein*, which features a great deal of food and wine. The idea was to have her cook from a novel. She took to it with no hesitations, beginning the menu with scotch and Doritos (the scene she drew from is included in this book, on pp. xxx-xxx). A "smashed sweet squash with a glaze of Madeira and honey" came beside a "great piggish grunt of a wine." That night we talked about fiction and its place in politics. A young musician named Jona Bechtolt, playing as YACHT, astonished us all with the cacophony of beats he could massage from his laptop.

The back room with Naomi cooking was as good as it gets. As spring came on, our evenings began drifting out into the herb garden

again, and the guests and musicians became a much more crucial part of the draw. Rather than a steady group of ripe regulars, we began to see different crowds for different kinds of events. Given ripe's popularity, getting the mix right took some planning and effort.

In one case, we collaborated with Chloe Eudaly, the founder of Portland independent bookstore Reading Frenzy. The art critic and essayist Lawrence Weschler was using a book tour to help promote the fortunes of smaller booksellers like Reading Frenzy. Chloe thought it was a good opportunity for her store to hold a more ambitious event, and so we invited Weschler to the back room. To get the mix right, we embargoed the announcement to ripe's list until after Reading Frenzy had a chance to send one out to theirs. We also tacked a presale of Weschler's book on to every ticket. The result was fifty hardback book sales for Reading Frenzy and an evening unburdened by the drama of consumer choice. Everyone arrived at dinner to find their fresh new copies, and the discussion was able to stray far away from the tedium of pushing product.

Weschler's dinner was sandwiched between two back rooms that were part of an exhibition, called DISH, conceived and curated by Stephanie Snyder and Nan Curtis, then director of the Feldman Gallery at Portland's Pacific Northwest College of Art. DISH featured fifty-three bowls made by Portland artist Daniel Duford, on which Duford glazed an unfolding narrative. We ate from the bowls, telling the story out loud as it was revealed by our eating, and

even licking the bowls clean. The first of these nights was sheer chaos. Photographer Lucien Samaha documented the guests and their bowls, moving among the narrow tables to “interview” each diner as he or she finished eating. He also set up a makeshift portrait studio by the toilets and made everyone pose there with a dish. There was a lot of drinking, and Kansas duo Drakkar Sauna pounded out their loud hillbilly/punk music.

For the second DISH event (on the other side of Weschler’s), the back room invaded the white-walled confines of the Feldman Gallery, where Daniel’s dishes and Lucien’s documentation had been installed as an art exhibition. We brought the food, drink, and music, our whole loud, crazy conversation, inside the gallery and dirtied the tables a second time.

That spring 2006, while the back room came into its own as a site of intellectual and visceral indulgence, ripe itself was heating up into a kind of fever dream of what restaurants could be. Michael and Naomi had begun cooking in a glass factory out in industrial St. Johns, a remote part of Portland. Collaborating with Esque, artisan glassblowers who made much of the glassware for ripe’s three restaurants, they had started making family supper-style meals right on the factory floor, cooking oysters, for example, with a two-second thrust into the hot box. Great pools of molten glass were poured on the dinner tables, and platters of food were set on these to stay warm. Back at ripe’s Gotham Building Tavern, aerial ballets were being performed

from guy wires hung off the exposed wooden beams; barrels of fire appeared in the alleyway, portable cookers for an ever-expanding feast; the ripe restaurants and their remarkable chefs—Tommy Habetz at the Gotham Building Tavern, Morgan Brownlow at clarklewis—were being lauded in the international food press, and Michael and Naomi, for better or worse, had been taken up as glamorous poster-children for the next wave of the putative “food revolution.”

When a big literary festival, Wordstock, came to ask if we’d host one of their literary dinners that April, it was easy to say yes and—in the heady atmosphere of possibilities catalyzed by Michael and Naomi’s superb optimism—to ask if, rather than host one of the Wordstock authors, we couldn’t just send a note to someone special and get ourselves a really interesting guest. I wrote to Gore Vidal and told him about ripe and Michael and Naomi. I invited him to come have dinner at the back room. Of course he said “yes.”

My essay pivots on this anecdote because it displays all of the tremendous capital that a heedless, creative venture like ripe can generate. The very ease and confidence with which this simple invitation went out—and was received—stems entirely from the fact of ripe and how it worked. Only rarely do investors looking at a bottom line have a chance to calculate the considerable cultural capital their work generates. Money was bleeding out of ripe, yes, but what the money set in motion was more valuable and longer lasting. It is impossible to overstate the impact ripe had on the arts in Portland.

No doubt, it's surprising to find a restaurant in the mix of a city's arts infrastructure. And I won't pretend that there aren't some, or even many, who know Portland well and would ridicule my claim. But the confidence and vitality ripe provided, the swiftly expanding rings by which its myriad initiatives swept out into the city, was a crucial fuel in the mix that helped this unlikely place grow a legible, dynamic arts culture.

A city's cultural life is typically fueled by universities, galleries, publishers, bookstores, and artist-run initiatives, such as shared studio space, a journal, or a reading series. In the great institutional ecology that is Portland's "art scene," ripe provided an ingredient that was nearly absent from those more traditional players: at the very simplest level, ripe insisted that art was the only priority—bureaucracy, good manners, good sense, all the calculating niceties of responsible management . . . those came in a very distant last. Everything that mattered at ripe was treated as the product of our refined sensibilities—the food, the space, the people, the social chemistry. Artists were never second-class citizens.

Ironically, this full citizenship for the arts was granted by a for-profit business that made its money marketing glamour. The difficulties that charitable groups or public initiatives face, in this regard, are paradoxical and instructive. Both are burdened with a procedural fairness that runs counter to many of the most vital, indefensible initiatives that we call art. Obligated to serve the needs of a broad public,

these institutions are rarely in a position to lead us to new possibilities. They can't move fast or impulsively. Yet that is what great art and writing do. The right to lead—to act as an artist—is paradoxically reserved for those with enough money, or few enough cares, to act independently, rashly, indefensibly.

Every now and then, money and autonomy get snared by someone with vision, and the resulting "business" can catalyze whole new worlds, which is one reason we find such a permeable membrane between the arts and business in a city like Portland. On a small scale, ripe made its own new world; on a larger one, the Portland-based ad firm Wieden + Kennedy irrigates its for-profit operations with a flood of artistic commissions that inevitably shape the way their advertisements speak to the bigger world. A three-second squib of computer sounds by Jona Bechtolt (that young man who played the back room as YACHT) suddenly circles the globe as a signature tune for a video game—and Jona gets enough money to pay for another year of music. For artists and writers starved for a sense of their usefulness in a city, such opportunities can be nourishing indeed. Ripe, operating at the scale of the dinner table, insisted that we speak globally with whom-ever we admire and say, in all truth and confidence: "Come here and join our conversation; pay attention; what's happening here, now, is worth your while."

That is certainly the conviction that powered the back room and brought us to some exciting programs that spring, including Gore

Vidal (Steven Malkmus played the music that night), and a memorable night with photographer Gregory Crewdson. Crewdson, who had come to Portland under the auspices of Stephanie Snyder and the Cooley Gallery at Reed College, followed a poignant and revealing hour in conversation with Stephanie by staying on to share brandy and some wide-ranging talk with a dozen guests until the restaurant crew finally had to kick us out. Crewdson's off-the-clock pleasures became the norm for our guest writers and artists. They had rarely had the sorts of exchanges the back room allowed, and most went away ready to evangelize for similar programs elsewhere.

I remember the start of that late-April evening very well, because our flawless server, the dancer and choreographer Daniel Addy, had atypically spilled a tray of votive candles just as we were setting up the tables for the event. He took a deep breath and pointed out that Mercury was in retrograde. "Let's just go slow," he said, "and take it easy. Tonight is going to be very strange." At the back room that night we had a lovely, slow, indulgent time. Honey Owens, playing music as Valet, sang, "We might jump out . . . of restless towers."

That same night, while we sailed past midnight drinking at the emptied tables with Crewdson, Michael and Naomi were at home trying to decide what to do about an intractable crisis. Ripe was hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt, and there was no way out of it. They considered almost everything, including simply disappearing to Mexico to start a new life. But in the end, the news Naomi an-

nounced by e-mail the next day was this: Michael had ceded all his financial stake in the restaurants to her and left town; together with the co-owners (two chefs and a battery of investors), she would be closing family supper and one restaurant, the Gotham Building Tavern, while trying to rescue the much-lauded and popular clarklewis.

But the die was cast. By May, clarklewis was all that remained of ripe, and Michael and Naomi had filed for divorce. These are the currents of real lives that power the sparkling, brilliant displays of culture that we all admire and devour, rarely knowing their real origins or costs.

And so business, the snake in the garden, had come home to roost. The back room, which had been structured as an independent nonprofit, was able to end the year afloat. But there would be no more subsidies. It was a bracing reminder of the burden of organizations and the advantages of traveling light. When it had been just Naomi and Michael and their fold-down table on Failing Street, the experience was just as fabulous, as memorable and transforming; but success beckoned growth, and they saw a way to ride that wave, ultimately to the great benefit of a vast community. It also took them far, far away from the place where they started.

Partly in the shadow of this collapse, the back room planned its next year as a nomadic, zero-sum assemblage of available parts. That is, we decided not to pursue any institutional permanence nor solicit programming budgets from the many patrons who had come to know

and appreciate the project. Instead of making long-term commitments to an abstract mission, we decided to conduct the back room as an ongoing conversation. Patrons, and anyone else interested in the back room, would just have to agree to keep talking to us; whenever a good idea came along, we'd ask for their support.

And so, rather than founding another organization, we offered to organize interested parties around shared opportunities. In between events, the back room would cease to exist.

Thereby, a second year has assembled itself. The British artist Sutapa Biswas, in Portland for an appearance at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art's Time Based Art festival (TBA), spent an evening at the back room in conversation with Stephanie Snyder. John Gorman, then at Simpatica, plied us with meats, and Zach Reno played his beautifully haunting solo music. Mary Gaitskill, invited to Portland by the city's Literary Arts program, came to the back room to talk with us about amorality, character, and the fate of fiction over a meal prepared by Jason Barwikowski, who had made our last supper at ripe (for the Crewdson back room) and was now at Simpatica.

In January 2007, Naomi Pomeroy found a way to restart family supper—now just “supper”—and return to work with the back room. We've had a half-dozen events together, and the zero-sum model has made a sustainable, portable, and flexible frame within which we continue to work and invent. Curtis Knapp's provision of live music, in particular, has taken full advantage of the flexibility of this model,

securing last-minute commitments from remarkable musicians whose part in the evenings has become crucial. A set of four songs by Dave Longstreth, of Dirty Projectors, at this fall's back room with poet Lisa Robertson and artists Hadley + Maxwell, was an especially memorable example.

In collaboration with Curtis and Stephanie Snyder, the mix of our special guests has managed to catalyze an equally rich mix in the audience that is drawn to these peripatetic happenings. The back room is everywhere in the city, and we have learned how to think together in public. Sometimes it takes until well past midnight.

The essays that follow are the printed, portable discourse of this ongoing feast. Many of them were actually commissioned by and for the back room, while others emerged out of the conversations that were started there. Still others (Gore Vidal's astonishing 1952 novel, for example) precede the back room considerably, as a kind of grandparent to this still-growing child. They are all members of a broadly shared conversation. We hope they inspire enactments of this same simple project where you live. It's so easy to get together over great food and drink. Why not make more of it?

*Curtis Knapp provided me with crucial insights and descriptions of the music discussed in this essay, and I am grateful for it.*