

cheap eats

feeding frenzies with pocket change
By KATIE SHIMER

El Dorado

It's my belief that a Mexican meal should always come with a side of rice and beans, and all the better if it's paired with a margarita the size of my head. El Dorado is the perfect Mexican cantina in that it provides cute ambience complete with murals, giant plates of food and the aforementioned behemoth boozy beverages.

The chow: A huge selection of platters made with peppery marinated chicken, steak spiked with lime, and prawns swimming in a host of spicy sauces. Favorites include the rich, chocolate-spiked chicken mole (\$10.40), the charcoal-grilled carne asada (\$12.15) and the extra-spicy Camarones Mexicanos (\$11.40) — a dish that bathes big, tasty prawns in a sauce of wine, butter, garlic, mushrooms, onions, tomatoes and bell peppers.

Real deals: A daily lunch special such as enchiladas runs \$4.95, and even at dinner time you can get a small combo (say, one enchilada and one tostada with rice and beans) for \$7.75. Stop by from 3 to 6 p.m. weekdays and scarf down incredible specials, including well drinks, taco salad, four beef tacos, flautas or a hamburger (\$1.95 each).

Hangout factor: The incredibly friendly staff, endless baskets of chips and salsa and the warm reds and oranges of the dining room will make you want to stay for hours.

Liquids: The margaritas are sweet, sour and to die for, and they come in versions big and small, blended and iced, regular and flavored, virgin and top-shelf.

What's half-baked? If you're on a diet, this probably isn't your spot because plates are huge; even the taco salad comes layered with half a pound of melted cheese.

Inside tips: Always check the specials board in the main dining room to find food and drinks for extra-cheap.

The numbers: 8001 N.E. Glisan St.; 503-255-2407

Katie Shimer is a Portland freelance writer.

platter

food finds, restaurant news and dining trends | By CHRISTINA MELANDER

FUN WITH FROMAGE — It's St. Patrick's Day, and I promise not to make a single unfunny reference to green beer. Instead, let's talk about another occasionally grass-hued substance: mold. The edible kind. Specifically, the type used to flavor and ripen cheese, a wondrous food that recently, thankfully, came to mean much more to Americans than just something you slap on a ham sandwich.

Without molds like penicillium, we wouldn't have Camembert, Brie or blue cheese. Imagine a world in which you could never bite into a steak slathered with funky Gorgonzola, a brilliant union of slightly sweet flesh and pungent, stand-at-attention cream. Terrible to contemplate such a joyless place, isn't it?

So hats off to grody, green-spore-producing microorganisms. And kudos to Bluehour (250 N.W. 13th Ave., 503-226-3394) for initiating a cheese program that corrals dozens of sublime, unfamiliar cheeses for our sampling pleasure.

While I'd just as soon live out the rest of my days without ever again beholding a tray of shel-lacked, sneezed-upon desserts, I jump at the chance to listen to Bluehour's fromager, Amanda DeMann, extol the supreme smoothness and lingering mouth-feel of Robiola Rocchetta or the salty tang of Spanish Mahon.

Last summer, Dolan Lane, a chef at Bluehour, spent a whirlwind four-day weekend soaking up the cheese scene at nonpareil curds and whey commissary Artisanal. (Bluehour-Balvo chef Kenny Giambalvo is good pals with Terrace Brennan, chef-proprietor of Manhattan restaurants Picholine and Artisanal, and the Artisanal Premium Cheese Center.) Under the wing of the center's dean of curriculum, master fromager and cheese zealot Max McCalman, Lane got a crash course in all things queso. He tailed McCalman on the floor at Picholine, hung out in the custom caves at the center, worked the counter at Artisanal and, most importantly, tasted his weight in cheese.

With his newfound knowledge of how to run a quality program, Lane returned to Portland and, in September, upgraded Bluehour's three-piece cheese plate to a selection of 12. Now the menu fromage includes 18 offerings (up to 22 when Lane finds something irresistible), featuring varieties from small domestic farms, Canadian creameries and all points — Por-



Bluehour's cheese plate includes cheeses from Spain, the Netherlands and Canada, along with apple slices, a slice of date-and-almond cake and quince paste.

DOLIG BEGHEL
THE OREGONIAN

tugal to the Netherlands — on the European map. Lane sources cheese from local fine-foods wholesaler Provvista, Newberg importer Italia Fine Living and Artisanal, which cave-ages cheeses to optimal ripeness.

"One thing people forget is that cheese is seasonal in terms of when you get the milk. Different cheeses are better at certain times of the year," Lane says.

Lane and DeMann keep their eyes and noses out for new cheeses to offer, striving to strike a balance of style, texture, taste and

pungency, and rely on Artisanal for recommendations. "The trust factor is high when ordering cheese, and we really trust them," Lane says.

Though the traditional cheese course is served before or in place of dessert, Lane urges diners to order as they please: as a prelude to dinner, during dinner or as a snack in the bar. "It's like wine. Some people like white wine with beef, and that's fine," he says. "Guests should order what they like, when they like."

Selections from the Bluehour

cheese cart are plated with baguette, quince paste and date-almond cake; cost ranges from \$15 for three cheeses to \$30 for seven, and servers will bring you a taste of just one if you ask nicely. "Our philosophy is if you want cheese, we'll give it to you."

That's the kind of world I'm keen on.

BEER AND EGGS — There's no shame in the midday beer. Think of how multiple-martini lunches once fueled many a deal, never mind if those boozy, palm-greasing meals helped push our country into a polarized, polluted state. You don't have to be a power broker to indulge: a beer might calm your nerves before a presentation or just help you survive an afternoon of mind-numbing filing (or on-the-sly blogging, as the case may be). Sandwich emporium Half & Half (923 S.W. Oak St., 503-222-4495) recently obtained a license to serve beer and wine. The beverage list is still coming together; meanwhile, well-chilled bottles of Miller High Life are available for \$1.75. Even better: High Life and two deviled eggs for \$3.25. Now it's happy hour all day long.

GOT A RESTAURANT TIP? Send to A&E Platter, *The Oregonian*, 1320 S.W. Broadway, Portland, OR 97201. Or fax: 503-294-5029.

Christina Melander is a Portland freelance writer. Contact her at cm@christinamelander.com.

Easter Brunch

Served 9am to 2:30pm

Choose from our Famous All-You-Can-Eat Sunday Brunch Buffet plus:

- 40 items to choose from
- Expanded dessert selection
- Strawberry Shortcake with real whipped cream
- Carved Prime Rib



Adults \$16⁹⁵ Kids \$8⁹⁵ (12 & Under)

RESERVATIONS REQUIRED CALL: 503-345-0300 EXT. 8570
Located at the Portlander Inn and Marketplace
1-5 - Exit 307 • 10350 N. Vancouver Way • Portland

PORTLANDER INN
CASCADE GRILL™