

# all you can eat



Seared ahi tuna on won-ton crisps by Portland City Grill. // PHOTO BY MICHAEL WILHELM

Celebrating its 20th anniversary, Taste of the Nation Portland gathers hundreds of adventurous palates in an effort to end hunger

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS | BY JANET FILIPS

Taste of the Nation Portland is the mother of all buffets, courtesy of Oregon's best chefs, vintners and brewmasters.

For a night, the Oregon Convention Center is your oyster (you'll find plenty on the half shell at the Jake's Grill booth) as you survey, flavor by flavor, Oregon's culinary scene. Go ahead and have seconds — it's all for a cause that warms hearts while it fills stomachs.

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# Taste of the Nation

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Since 1988, Oregon's food industry and friends have joined an 80-city national effort to end hunger, especially childhood hunger, in the U.S. and beyond.

Portland's Taste celebrated its 20th anniversary this year with a record-breaking take of \$100,000. Its 20-year contribution to hunger relief — largely in Oregon and southwest Washington — tops \$1.1 million.

When the doors opened April 30 at the Oregon Convention Center, 820 guests were like kids in an amusement park with an all-rides bracelet — where to go first, what to see next?

Jeremy Vermilyea's strategy was a popular one at the evening's outset. "My idea," said the Tigard resident, "is to keep moving."

The tables offered culinary worlds to conquer: English pea panna cotta with applewood-smoked

bacon and pinot noir shallots from Dundee Bistro; shrimp coated with popcorn powder, fried in butter and peanut oil and presented in popcorn bags by Gracie's at Hotel deLuxe; grilled flatbread filled with house-made sausages or chickpeas from Meriwether's Restaurant; wild salmon tartare on scallion pancakes from Pazzo Ristorante; leek flan with Oregon wild mushroom sauce from Hurley's; caramelized waffles with orange-blossom ice cream and hot fudge from Bread & Ink Cafe.

The bounty of food was matched by a vast selection of wines, cocktails, microbrews, sake, tea and bottled water.

"It's amazing," said Cindy Young of Southeast Portland, diving into a duck confit salad and Medjool-date-filled cookies from Three Degrees at the

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As a preview to Taste of the Nation, Simpatuca Dining Hall hosted an April 18 dinner with partial proceeds benefiting hunger relief. David Kreifels spit-roasts the lamb for the dinner, and Taste of the Nation stalwarts Amelia Hard, Allison Bader, Gina Fleischner and Michael Slocombe pitched in on the meal. // PHOTO BY STEVEN GIBBONS

# Taste of the Nation

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RiverPlace Hotel. “All these restaurants, and you can walk up and have a taste” (and chat with the chef, too).

As jazz piano provided background, Miranda Rake, 23, of Northwest Portland proclaimed herself in heaven. A ticket to Taste was a birthday gift from her mom. Rake, a chocolatier and writer, said the wealth of superb food left her nearly speechless. But she found words to praise the braised pork cheeks with lentils from Carafe Bistro, the roulade of duck and foie gras from Bluehour, the oyster shooter with kimchi gelée and chives from Saucebox. “It’s like the biggest, best birthday party,” she said, her mother beaming.

As the evening wound on, the mood changed from

the joy and frenzy of food discoveries to the fun of running into acquaintances and trading food tips (“The tiramisu down there” — a wave toward Ciao Vito — “is really good!”) and contemplating the cause.

Standing beside Piece of Cake’s display of desserts, Steve Rosenberg of Northeast Portland barely moved. “I’m not even looking at food any more,” he said, “I’m so stuffed.” It was nearing 9 p.m., when the chefs and their staffs would package leftovers to donate to the St. Vincent de Paul Food Recovery Program — 558 pounds, as it turned out.

Rosenberg, his wife, Rebecca Biggs, and their 14-year-old son volunteer at the Oregon Food Bank, helping package bulk foods into family-sized portions.

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Simpatica’s grilled rapini was one of the many dishes raising money for hunger relief. Most Oregon adults who receive emergency meals are working, retired or disabled. // PHOTO BY STEVEN GIBBONS

# Taste of the Nation

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Part of the Taste's magic is the chance to fill your plate with as much food as you desire. Bruce Bollard and Dana Robinson check out offerings from Portland City Grill.  
// PHOTO BY MICHAEL WILHELM

"I enjoy good food," said Biggs, "and there's nothing wrong with having beautiful food. But not everyone gets that."

The best part of the night? Biggs didn't hesitate. The size of the crowd, she said. More ticket-holders meant more money for Oregon Food Bank, where every dollar translates into six pounds of food.

Throughout the convention center, one wish was repeated: "I don't want to get full." But getting full is precisely the wish of the children and adults on the real receiving end of the night's work. ☘

## TURNING FOOD INTO MONEY

At Taste of the Nation, one lucky person's overflowing plate turns into a less-fortunate person's food box.

Originally called Chef's Night Out, Taste of the Nation outgrew its original home, the Portland Center for the Performing Arts, and moved in 2006 to the Oregon Convention Center.

**How it works:** A ticket lets you roam a room full of beautifully presented food and drink. You taste and sip whatever you want.

**Money matters:** Participating restaurants, beverage companies, food suppliers and staffs donate food, drink and labor, so every cent earned from tickets and a silent auction goes to hunger relief. Local and national sponsors cover other costs. (American Express is presenting sponsor.)

The donated money is divided by a national formula: 80 percent stays in Oregon and southwest Washington; 20 percent supports international and domestic programs — including the Oregon Hunger Relief Task Force, which addresses Taste's special concern about child hunger.

**Who benefits:** Oregon Food Bank (a network of 20 regional food banks and 884 hunger relief agencies), St. Vincent de Paul Food Recovery Program, Sisters of the Road Cafe and Klamath-Lake Counties Food Bank. Contact information for each beneficiary is available at [www.portlandtaste.org/benefit.htm](http://www.portlandtaste.org/benefit.htm).

Each month, an average of 72,000 children and 122,000 adults in Oregon and Clark County, Wash., rely on emergency food boxes.

**Numbers to chew on:** The inaugural Portland event, in 1988, was organized by Bill King of McCormick & Schmick's and Amelia

Hard, then of Genoa Restaurant. The '88 event drew 300 guests and raised \$3,000. Seventeen restaurants, nine wineries, one brewery and musicians participated.

This year, 820 guests attended, and proceeds topped \$100,000. Participants included 79 restaurants, 54 beverage purveyors (from wines to water); four bands and dozens of businesses that donated auction items and services.

**Plan ahead:** Next year's Taste is April 28. Ticket prices are to be announced. (This year's general admission was \$75 —partially tax deductible. An extra \$25 garnered VIP status and entrance an hour earlier.) To stay in the loop, e-mail "info@portlandtaste.org" and ask to be put on the mailing list.

**Next chance to help:** The Safeway Waterfront Blues Festival — July 4 to 8 and also celebrating its 20th year — benefits Oregon Food Bank. To fight hunger year-round, go to [www.portlandtaste.org](http://www.portlandtaste.org) and click the Volunteer button.

**Big motivation:** Childhood hunger and malnutrition are linked with an array of troubles, including problems in learning, behavior, health, development and emotional stability.



Chef Amelia Hard's passion for raising money to end hunger is shared by many chefs, including Michael Slocombe (right).  
PHOTO BY STEVEN GIBBONS

## Stepping up to the plate

BY JANET FILIPS

“I wanted the guests to have just the most fantastic time imaginable, to say, ‘Oh my God,’ to their friends the next day, ‘you missed the most incredible experience. You’ve got to go next year.’”

— Amelia Hard,  
one of the event's original organizers

Amelia Hard graduated from Reed College in 1967, an English major who, through serendipity, discovered a love for the food world that led to a major commitment to bring food to the hungry.

In 1974, Hard was tiring of her post as a clerk-librarian for the Multnomah County Library. When a friend asked if she wanted to work with Michael Vidor, she bit. Vidor was an untrained, trailblazing restaurateur and Harvard graduate who had launched L'Auberge Restaurant on West Burnside and Genoa in Southeast Portland. He was staffing a new venture, The Wood Stove, on Northwest Vaughn Street (later to become L'Auberge and now Meriwether's).

Vidor's approach was to hire people with brains and passion — not necessarily restaurant experience — and rotate them through different roles. Hard waited tables and commandeered the French-imported spit over the open fireplace. She found herself tapping into the feel for food that her Italian-American mother

— a superb cook and an actress — had instilled in her.

After a time at The Wood Stove, in 1978 Hard joined the wait staff at Genoa — a funky spot serving heavenly northern Italian food. Within four years, Hard and her husband, Fred, bought Genoa, which gained international culinary fame.

But there in Southeast Portland, Amelia met the local face of hunger and homelessness. In 1985, every night a few homeless people knocked on Genoa's back door, asking for a handout.

“It was such a vivid contrast,” Hard, 62, recalls now. “To be behind the serving window at Genoa, looking out into the dining room, and here's this exquisite setting with the warm lights and people drinking wine and eating beautiful food, laughing and having a wonderful time, and just outside the door, a few feet away, there are guys who are hungry.”

The restaurant stocked up on plastic forks and spoons and carryout containers to give away pastas and soup. “We were continued on page 140

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basically running a hot meals program out of the back door of Genoa, which probably was illegal,” Hard says. “But in those days it was still a pretty new phenomenon.”

At a 1987 meeting of Northwest Women Chefs, Jimella Lucas of The Ark Restaurant in Nahcotta, Wash., read a letter from Billy Shore, who was on the staff of Sen. Gary Hart, D-Colo. Shore had an idea for helping ease local and world hunger through his two-year-old organization, Share Our Strength.

The letter sketched Shore’s idea for what became Taste of the Nation: Prominent chefs in U.S. cities would gather other chefs to put on a fundraiser under the Share Our Strength umbrella. The chefs would create great food, since that’s what they do. Shore would secure a national sponsor to help cover overhead; restaurants would ask others to donate supplies and look for local sponsors; ticket revenue would go entirely to hunger relief.

“We all looked at that and went, ‘Wow, that’s a cool idea,” Hard says.

Back home, Hard called Shore, who said he had already been in touch with Bill King, then the executive chef at the McCormick & Schmick’s Seafood Restaurant in Old Town. Hard and King agreed to pool their resources and pull off an event.

For that first 1988 Chefs’ Night Out, as it was called, Hard and King sold about 300 tickets and spiked the crowd with friends they’d persuaded to come. They had faith that word of mouth would help it grow. Twenty years later, the event is a culinary highlight that draws elaborate contributions from the food and beverage industry and larger crowds who appreciate both the cuisine and mission.

What hooked Hard into staying so involved? “No one ever said no,” she says, emphasizing each word. “I mean that literally. And frequently, the answer was not only, ‘What a great idea,’ but ‘Thank you — thank you for calling me, thank you for giving me a way to contribute.’ Over and over again — ‘Thank you for giving me the opportunity.’”

Her biggest cause now is to keep reminding people that hunger is not an old story. It’s an everyday story. And there are many ways to help: Skip lunch and send the money to the Oregon Food Bank. Help your child’s school organize a food drive. Organize a food drive in your neighborhood. Volunteer with the Oregon Food Bank’s cooking classes or teaching garden.

The chefs outdo themselves each year at Taste of the Nation. You can find your own way of outdoing yourself to close the door on hunger. ✕