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Looking for food in all the right places

By Jennifer Moody, Albany Democrat-Herald | Posted: Saturday, July 3, 2010 10:30 pm

It's 4 p.m. on June 26, gloriously sunny and melted-butter warm. I've been invited to ride a trolley through Albany, stopping for snacks at some of the best restaurants in town.

I'm dreaming, obviously. I'm really stuck in a staff meeting, it's 56 degrees outside and drizzling, and all the lunch I've had time for is some string cheese and a handful of peanuts.

Right? Because, seriously, how could I land an assignment like this?

But no: There's Jimmie Lucht, director of the Albany Visitors Association, climbing aboard the trolley with me, along with other members of the AVA, the city council, the Chamber of Commerce and the Albany Downtown Association. In all, we number about 25.

Moments later, we're rumbling toward Novak's Hungarian Restaurant, where sisters Karen, Matilda and Kay Marie Novak are waiting with glasses of malna, a cold raspberry soda, and little dishes of their house specialty, chicken paprikas.

If this is a dream, don't wake me. That bit about the cheese-and-peanuts lunch was true.

This is the inaugural Albany Nosh Tour, a guided, nine-stop excursion through town to highlight home-grown establishments and introduce the people behind them.

Culinary experiences are a rapidly-growing segment of the travel industry. Toss "food tours" into an online search engine and stand back: Google alone shoots out more than 500,000 possibilities, from San Francisco to Singapore.

A 2007 study by the Travel Industry Association, in partnership with Gourmet magazine and the International Culinary Tourism Association, found that in the three years before the survey, 17 percent of leisure travelers in the United States went looking for food- or wine-related activities when out of town. California is the most popular stop, closely followed by Florida and New York.

AVA board member Debbie Lusk figures Oregon can make its own mark. She organized this tour and is already planning more. She went on similar outings in Ashland and Portland and found them a great opportunity to showcase local standouts.

"I know that if they can do it in Portland, we can do it here," she says as we make our way to Pizza King, where owner Ruby Lewis is waiting to whip up orecchiette pasta with grated garlic and lemon right before our eyes.

Michael and Jolene Thomson and Julie and Perry Meier, all of Albany, won tickets to the jaunt through an AVA drawing.

Julie is thrilled to have her favorite, crab rangoon at Sybaris: succulent crab in a creamy, sweet sauce wrapped in a delicately crispy wonton wrapper.

Jolene tries the chili beer at Calapooia Brewing Company and isn't too sure, but its kick is perfect for Kathy Body, instructional assistant for Linn-Benton Community College's culinary arts program. "That would be good with nachos or something," she says as she sips.

We sample apricot pepper jelly at P'Shaws gift boutique, Frito pie with homemade chili at First Burger and prosciutto-wrapped cantaloupe with a tangy, gooey balsamic reduction at Clemenza's.

Vault 244 offers herb-crusting filet mignon in a raspberry demi-glace, alongside dabs of garlic mashed potatoes. Boccherini's wraps it up with miniature raspberry-white-chocolate Rocket Queen cupcakes, washed down with iced coffee mixed with half-and-half.

We learn as we go. Calapooia's Laura Bryngelson gives us a brewery tour. Pizza King offers Italian cooking classes. Vault 244 is providing outdoor dining (minors welcome). Novak's is adding gluten-free options and will make your favorites if you ask, even if they aren't on the menu.

"There is so much here that people don't know about," Lusk says.

True, but what I know for certain is I'm very full. So is Julie Meier. "I am not going to eat for a week," she declares.

Neither am I. Unless I really am dreaming and someone is about to wake me for breakfast.

I hear the brunch at Novak's is amazing.