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## Jonathan Gold Reviews a Beefsteak at Vibiana

By Jonathan Gold Thursday, Dec 8 2011 Comments (16) Like Share Tweet 21 385 Pocket 1

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If a deranged chef held a fish knife to my throat and demanded that I name the greatest chunk of food writing ever put into print, I'm pretty sure that after a bit of waffling about Calvin Trillin and Collette and a rant about barbecue that Charlie Haas once snuck into the old *New West* magazine, I probably would come up with Joseph Mitchell's "All You Can Hold for Five Bucks," a much-reprinted sketch on the subject of political fundraising dinners, which appeared in a 1939 issue of *The New Yorker*. Mitchell, of course, is on every short list of the great literary journalists, and some of his best writing, most of it collected in the anthology *Up in the Old Hotel*, explores the intersection of eating, eccentricity and old New York, which was already disappearing by the time he got around to documenting it in the 1930s. Wordsworth had daffodils; Mitchell had Staten Island oystermen, cranky saloon keepers and waterfront fish houses already old by the time Melville might have gotten around to eating in them.

But to a reader already devoted to the arts of excess and culinary debauchery, "All You Can Hold for Five Bucks" is the finest of all Mitchell's stories, a kind of ode to a mode of eating that had already fallen into steep decline. "The New York State steak dinner, or 'beefsteak,'" Mitchell begins, "is a form of gluttony as stylized and regional as the riverbank fish fry, the hot-rock clambake, or the Texas barbecue."



PHOTO BY ANNE FISHBEIN  
Beefsteak 2011 organizers Cort Cass, Jeff Micht, Susan and Eric Wareheim with chef Neal Fraser

At a beefsteak, enormous affairs thrown in inelegant basements, revellers feasted on lamb chops, kidneys wrapped in bacon, and profoundly aged New York steaks, grilled rare, sliced and served on monstrous platters. The beverage of choice — the only beverage — was beer served in great, foaming mugs, and as at a proper Texas barbecue pit, utensils and napkins

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After *Up in the Old Hotel* was published in 1992, the idea of beefsteaks came back into circulation, and when you talk to serious eaters who came of age in the era, you often hear of attempts to duplicate the dinners Mitchell described. I threw my own small beefsteak 15 or so years ago at the old Vida, where Fred Eric did the cooking, and I remember checking in on the progress of the aging beef with neurotic frequency, observing the sour smell, the alarming seepage and the thick, furry layers of blue-green mold that made it look vaguely like a meat-shaped Chia Pet. I fretted about the exact composition of the sauce — the juices stirred with Worcestershire sauce and melted butter — that would be poured over the steak as it rested on thin, crisp slices of toast. I worried that nobody would eat the bacon-wrapped kidneys. And when the day arrived, the meat was trimmed and cooked, and I took my first tart, glorious, butter-soft bite of prime meat that had been aged for nearly two months, I was ecstatic. It had been worth the trouble.

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