

Refuge: Pastrami, Cheesesteaks, and Belgian Beer

The restaurant, Refuge, pulses with a palpable energy. It's an energy fueled by foods not often seen this side of the country: thick cuts of house-cured pastrami stacked into Reuben towers; soft french rolls crafted into flavor-packed cheesesteak sandwiches. Paired with Belgian and American craft beers, it's enough to make even the most scrutinizing East Coaster weak in the knees.

"I know the power of good pastrami, and it's not happening out here (the West Coast)," said Refuge's Matt Levine, who owns and operates the restaurant at 963 Laurel St. with his wife, Melanie Roth. Ohio-born and raised, Levine's expertise is borne from a childhood spent taking long pilgrimages through Amish country to the Reuben and cheesesteak epicenter, Philadelphia.

A former punk rocker, Levine transitioned to culinary school at the ripe age of 27. To make up for lost time, Levine adopted a single-minded pursuit of working under culinary greats. As a result, he has cooked for some of the most renowned Michelin Star-rated restaurants in San Francisco and Paris.

Inspiration for Refuge came to Levine while he was working as a sous chef in San Francisco. "I was getting tired of fancy food," he explained. "I started developing the pastrami recipe in my spare time. There was a point when I thought, 'Whoa. This is worth the risk.'"

Someone who was willing to take that risk with Levine was Michael Greuel -- a chef for whom Levine once worked. "He actually quit his job before I left mine," Levine said of his Refuge co-founder, "He's the type of guy who would cut off his own arm if you asked him to. He's extremely loyal."



Left to right: Michael Greuel, Matt Levine and Melanie Roth.

Greuel, who went to art school in his pre-chef days, is also the artist behind the restaurant's logo. An Egyptian-style eagle with its wings outstretched, the logo is a reference to Levine's name. "The Levite tribe was one of the 12 tribes of Israel, and legend has it that one of their symbols was the bird." For Levine, the bird serves as a point of focus amidst the demands of a growing business. "I always say, it's all about the bird."

From the beginning, the focus of Refuge and the bird was clear: "I just wanted pastrami, burgers and cheesesteaks -- three of the oldest foods in America." The emphasis on craft beer was more of an evolution. "We started out thinking we were going to do more of a wine bistro type thing. We had 18 wines by the glass, and only five beer taps." Levine, however, is a strong believer that America is, at its heart, a beer drinking culture.

There was another motivation to switch the focus to beer. "I always want to do stuff that is hard to copy, to have and do things that others won't do." Along with pastrami and cheesesteaks, Belgian beer fit that bill. For the first couple of years, the beer list was almost exclusively Belgian. Levine only opened up to domestic brews when the tidal wave of American craft beer hit -- what Levine refers to as the "Renaissance of American brews."

Levine's motivation to have and do what others will not also fuels his commitment to pastrami. "Pastrami, it's insane. It's incredibly labor intensive and results in very little product." Brining the meat for three to five days, and then cooking it for two to five hours results in the signature thick, succulent slices of pastrami. "We are cooking our pastrami to maximum tenderness, which most guys don't do. That's why they have to shave it so thin on a machine - the meat is harder."

Opened in 2008, it didn't take long for Refuge to enjoy early success and garner a loyal following. That following led to a 2013 feature on the Food Network show, "Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives." "That really changed everything, it was like winning the marketing lottery," said Levine.

As Refuge and its popularity continues to expand -- there is now a second, larger location in Menlo Park at 1143 Crane St. -- Levine, Roth and Greuel keep themselves grounded by operating in an "as if" state. "You can have a great month, a great year, but so what? We can never rest on our laurels, and each day we try to get better." Because after all, in the end, it's all about the bird. 