

Albatross & Co & Eric Bechard

“Stirring His Brandy With A Nail”:
The Style + Story Behind An Expansion”

THE POET

SIMON ARMITAGE once said, “If you can write about the individual, that appeals to the individual, then you’re going to appeal to absolutely everybody.”

He may have been speaking as a writer, but I imagine the same applies to running a business. I ventured west after eight years in New York, seeking new creative/emotional context, and one of my parting impressions was that of a city struggling to maintain its edge amidst corporate and consumer shifts. My tenure saw cultural landmarks like the Chelsea Hotel and CBGB, among other beloved establishments, gradually disappear, transformed into condos, brunch niches, and Duane Reades. Brooklyn in particular underwent a trendy (and heatedly gentrified) facelift that trended itself right into ridicule, becoming more brand than borough over time. Make no mistake, my love for New York goes deep--that never departs. But change is inevitable for any metropolis or town on the rise, which you can ignore, fight, or cultivate. Otherwise, you move on. The longing for authenticity is impossible to ignore, and where style and substance cohabitate you get--well, Astoria.

I was reminded of Simon Armitage the night I spoke to Eric Bechard, owner of Albatross & Co, as the concept of authenticity reiterated itself throughout our conversation. Opened a little over two years ago, Albatross began as an intimate beer, cocktail, and artisanal sandwich spot that, by Bechard’s own admittance, quickly outgrew its cozy front-of-house space. A successful chef and restaurateur of 15+ years, with the likes of McMinnville’s Thistle and Portland’s Alberta Street Oyster Bar to his name, Bechard had no initial plans to expand on Albatross until happy necessity demanded.

The roughly 800-foot expansion began almost a year ago, and Bechard admits to the goodhearted frustration he was met with as opening delays were prolonged. “Every time I’d get ready to do it, it didn’t feel done, and I’d hold off. I think it drove people a little crazy.” He continues, “I can be a slave to detail. I’d rather wait and do it right, so that when it’s done you’ll truly appreciate it.” That dedication to detail shows. From the gas canisters purchased at Vintage Hardware and repurposed into lamps, to the chicken nesting boxes that now serve as bar shelving, Bechard’s eye is not only keen but impressively creative. (For example, the fireplace table is a restructured ship hatch from World War II.) Items such as the copper Moscow Mule mugs from the 60’s and 70’s were meticulously hunted down at thrift stores and rummage sales. An impressive free standing rail beam is actually the outer slab of an enormous log purchased from an Oregon City chainsaw mill, the main bar consisting of the inner portion.

“Everything here has a point,” Bechard notes. And, I can’t help but admire, a story.

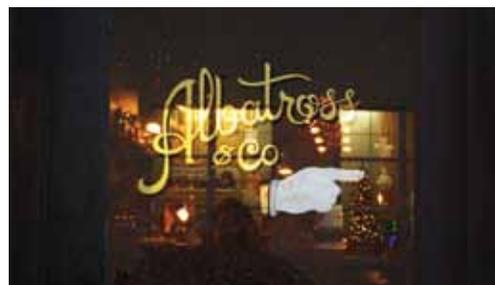
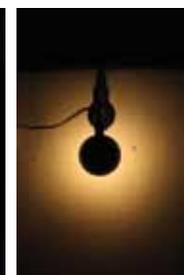
Bechard cites no specific era or style from which he draws inspiration, (“Doc Holliday, Tom Waits, and MacGyver walk into a bar” was my helpful suggestion) but states simply that art imitates life where design is concerned. “This is pretty much what my house looks like,” he says, “it’s not just a business aesthetic.” His pleasure in curating pieces for repurposing and personal enjoyment seems to be the guiding line for his ventures, explaining that “I enjoy designing as much as running a business, so I’m interested in trends, but I don’t do things because they’re popular. The best trends happen organically, over time, and by word of mouth.”

It’s hard not to draw a correlation between the topic of trends and Astoria itself, as the town continues to flourish. “I feel like the reason Astoria is so popular is because it never set out to be popular,” Bechard says. “It wasn’t trying to be anything but itself. That perfect storm of time and place catapulted it onto a national scale, but it’s being proactive about its popularity. It’s not changing so rapidly that you aren’t aware it’s happening.” While we discussed at length our views on actively contributing to such a community, rather than riding the wave for personal gain, Bechard stresses the importance of supporting the local economy. He praises David Rafkin, owner of Reclaimed Lumber, for supplying the wood that accounts for the oyster bar and fireplace structure. Furthermore, 100% of Albatross’s seafood is procured from small family fisheries, with additional menu items provided by ethical independent farms within a two hundred mile radius, Bechard’s belief being that proximity to the source should be fully utilized, with keywords like ‘local’ and ‘sustainable’ serving as more than just catchwords.

Overall, he credits much of his business’s success--and subsequent expansion--to the overwhelming support of the community, as well as the amazing Albatross staff. He expresses his gratitude with a refreshing matter-of-factness, and admits that the expansion has allowed for welcome additions to the menu and overall atmosphere. “The beauty of Albatross is it fills a lot of people’s needs,” Bechard says. “You can get a beer and burger for under \$20, or drop \$250 if you want.” (It’s true. I’ve done both.)

A telling testament to all of the above is a bench that sits in the entrance of the new Albatross space, gifted from a friend to celebrate the expansion. Fashioned from a wooden floating device found on the beach, you can just make out the S carved into the surface. Bechard smiles at how quickly guests have made it a comfortable fixture. Small detail perhaps, but one that speaks volumes.

Located at 225 14th Street, Albatross & Co is open Tuesday-Saturday, 5pm-Late
You can visit their site at www.albatrossand-company.com for menu and event info.



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