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## Avant-garde artist, local chef cook up over-the-top feast

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Hal France eyed the moist, glistening brain on his plate with apprehension before shoveling a forkful into his mouth.

"The texture is definitely like tofu," said France, executive director of the Kaneko, Omaha's creativity center. "And the aftertaste reminds me of liver."



Guests take in the room full of Paul Renner's paintings before sitting down to an unusual dinner at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts.

France and about a hundred other gastronomical guinea pigs were at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts last Friday as part of a bizarre artistic and culinary experiment.

Paul Renner, an Austrian painter, raconteur and all-around bon vivant, was in town to stage an art exhibit and feast called "The Omaha Diner."

The event, really a social happening held last Friday and Saturday, was intended to be a true sensory overload.

It featured a display of Renner's expressionistic paintings about — what else? — hard-core food: images of rib cages, raw meat, fish heads and such.

The dinner also included burning incense, ambient music, dramatic readings, weird finger foods and enough wine to lubricate a Roman bacchanal. Yep, the event covered all five senses.

And Renner and his partner for the dinner, Boiler Room executive chef Paul Kulik, prepared an adventurous six-course meal. The main offerings — lamb brain, tripe and pork belly — were definitely not intended for faint-hearted eaters.

"I focus on organ meats and other body parts that are usually thrown away," said Renner, who split the cooking duties with Kulik. "But earlier generations ate this kind of food, and I'm bringing the old recipes back in a gourmet style."

### The Omaha Diner

**What:** Paul Renner paintings about hard-core food and dining, and an accompanying feast. Two dinners were held last weekend; the art remains on display through early June.

**Where:** Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, 724 S. 12th St.

**When:** Through June 6. Gallery hours 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

**Admission:** Free. Call 341-7130.

A native of Bregenz, Austria, the 52-year-old Renner learned cooking from his grandmother, a professional cook who reportedly served as chef to Crown Prince Wilhelm.

He received his artistic training, meanwhile, as an assistant to Austrian performance artist Hermann Nitsch, whose abstract paintings — known as "splatter art" — suggest blood-soaked violence.

Renner combined his passion for cooking with his fascination for avant-garde painting after discovering Medlar Lucan and Durian Gray's "The Decadent Cookbook."

That hedonistic tome featured historically dubious recipes from the kitchens of such figures as the mad Roman Emperor Caligula and the Marquis de Sade. The cookbook became Renner's visual and culinary bible.

By the late 1990s, Renner joined forces with Lucan and Gray to establish the Hell Fire Dining Club. The group began staging Renner's painting/cooking exhibitions in Europe and New York City.

The theme of these shows was always decadence.

"I believe that when a culture becomes too refined it falls back into itself," Renner said. "I try to capture that moment of decay in my art and cooking."

Renner and Kulik suggested decadence both in their choice of food parts and in their presentation.

 ONLINE EXTRA

• **Photo Showcase:** [The Omaha Diner](#)

"It's all about patina," Kulik said. "You want to have stuff oozing and running off the plate."

Plans to bring Renner to Omaha had been in the works for about three years after Omahan John Wilson — who is on the board at the Joslyn Art Museum — saw one of the artist's events in New York City, said Mark Masuoka, executive director of the Bemis.

Last Friday's festivities began with Renner striking a ritualistic gong to summon his guests to dinner.

The diners, including such Omaha notables as France, ceramic artist Jun Kaneko and Film Streams executive director Rachel Jacobson, sat around a horseshoe-shaped table surrounded by Renner's paintings.

A small stage for music and dramatic readings was in the middle of the horseshoe. Both the stage and the table were draped with a caul-fat tablecloth, a waxy material made from animal intestines.

Renner and Kulik presided from a cooking table — decorated with dried peppers and mummified sheep heads — in the front of the room.

Once the guests — some of whom had paid as much \$120 to munch on various viscera — were seated, a group of artsy, head-plume-wearing wait staff began distributing the food.

The first round of appetizers were canapés — bread with vegetable and meat toppings — that Renner called the "Devil's Kiss." One was topped with olive oil, diced tomatoes and black olives; another was covered with a streaked, unidentified meat.

Eckart Brandhoff, of Munich, Germany, who traveled to Omaha for the Bemis feast, said it's sometimes best not to know the ingredients in Renner's recipes.

"It goes down a little easier when you don't know what you're eating," said Brandhoff, an art collector who has been buying Renner's paintings for more than a decade.

After each course, actors mounted the stage to read some of Lucan and Gray's Hell Fire essays.

The readings were often humorous. Actor Kevin Lawler, one of the founders of Omaha's Blue Barn Theater, drew huge laughs and applause for a monologue that praised philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche for having the "world's largest mustache."

Live ambient music followed the readings. Electric guitarist Dereck Higgins played various chords through a sampler. The result was often an industrial-strength musical roar that seemed a perfect fit for the evening's decadent theme.

Two more appetizers — a rather inoffensive chicken liver parfait and a kind of marinated cabbage called Senfkohl — were passed around. Then Renner offered a word of warning about the evening's first entree.

"If you decide not to touch what's about to be put on your plates, well, that's OK," he said.

Kiwi-fruit-size lamb brains, smothered in an oozing purple sauce, were then distributed.

France seemed both bemused and befuddled as he stared at his plate.

His companion, Omaha Symphony first violinist Rebecca Vanderholm, merely seemed disgusted. She was text messaging with her elementary school-age daughter when the brains arrived. Her daughter summed up in one word what many in the room probably were thinking.

"Yuck!"

Still, most of the diners said they were attending the Renner feast for the adventure, so almost everyone sampled some of the brain. A few were surprised.

"It wasn't as horrible as I would have thought," said Jacobson, whose Film Streams had shown the movie "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife & Her Lover" in conjunction with the Bemis event.

Kaneko was pleased.

"The brain was the best thing on the menu," he said.

As the evening wore on — and the wine maintained its steady flow — the apprehension about the food began to dissipate,

and people began to get out of their seats to mingle.

Renner persuaded one of the servers, 25-year-old Beth Radloff, to sing an a cappella rendition of "(Sittin' on) the Dock of the Bay." Her surprisingly soulful, deeply felt and seemingly impromptu performance won a rousing ovation.

Dessert arrived shortly before 11 p.m., nearly four hours after the first appetizer was served. The delicacy, rolled out on a large pushcart, was called the "Trash Pile," and it did resemble a pile of waste in a landfill.

Yet it was actually a tower of sweet cake and candy, and it came as a welcome surprise at the end of Renner's shock feast. It also inspired the evening's only food fight, with several diners hurling fists of cake around the room.

Renner watched the spontaneous expression of mayhem with a delighted grin.

"Ultimately, this event isn't about the food," he said. "It's about getting people together and watching them interact. That's the art."

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