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Meaty Topics



Art meets eats in Paul Renner's The Omaha Diner

by Sarah Baker and Lainey Seyler

Paul Renner has been running around Omaha picking up plates and silverware from local Salvation Army stores in preparation for his art installations/black tie dinners at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art. Called *The Omaha Diner* and held two nights, May 8 and 9, the dinner and accompanying exhibition explores the marriage of vulgar and lavish.

Renner, known for bold work that combines art objects with nose-to-tail cooking, will present an installation — and two six-course meals to 160 Omahans — during his stay at the Bemis. Though he works with haute cuisine, he's quick to say he doesn't consider a chef to be an artist. Instead, he uses food as a medium — like a pencil, he said.

His work spans traditional artistic boundaries: It's part performance art, part social theater and part adventurous cuisine. Each meal is set in an environment singular to that dinner; food works as sculpture against a transformative background in which diners are part of the art.

Renner lives in Bregenz, Austria, and Piedmont, Italy. He founded the Hell Fire Touring and Dining Club, designs buildings for his culinary art, including the Theatrum Anatomicum and has created projects at the Kunsthhaus Bregenz, the Leo Koenig Gallery and the Kunsthalle Wien.

The theme of the first night's dinner is Europe. In collaboration with The Boiler Room's Chef Paul Kulik, Renner plans to offer 19 items, served in six or seven courses, each based on 19 areas in Europe, from Edinburgh down to Sicily, and related to 19 parts of the body, starting with the tongue. Renner has promised he won't serve brains, but patrons should expect a lot of meat.



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"When I came here to do the installation, I saw that Omaha is a center for meat," said Renner. "I am a person who takes attention to the whole body. I do not want to throw anything away."

He continued talking about the many parts of cow that Americans in particular don't eat.

"I want to make people understand that a cow is not a steak," he said.

The following night's theme moves to North America. Renner plans to use the same food to create a menu focused on American cuisine.

The installation for *The Omaha Diner* is a lot to take in. It's in Bemis gallery three, and a huge table takes up most of the room, but it's not just any table. It's elegantly draped with hundreds of web-like bovine stomach linings. The scent of the linings was the first thing to notice upon entering — it's a meaty, heady aroma that the Bemis Center's Rachel Ziegler said had changed since the linings were installed. She said that at first it smelled like someone was cooking meat in the gallery. During the Friday opening, it smelled thicker than that, older and more complex. The scent will surely be different by this Friday, for the first of Renner's two dinners. Work from his previous Diners is installed on three of the four walls. The last one, titled "Omaha," is a collage of photographs of Renner cooking, a few bunches of herbs and an overwhelming red mass of meat and meat parts smeared together.

The last wall had two large-scale video pieces, projecting films of previous Diners.

His concept for this show is at once appealing and appalling.

After a one-night-only presentation at Film Streams of *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, a film where food meets sex, meets gluttony, meets social commentary, Renner talked about his work for the audience of about 100.

"We live in a plastic world," Renner said. "We eat plastic food on a plastic plate with a plastic fork. It's horrible."

Renner, clearly, is nearly the complete opposite of plastic. In fact, he has strong words for most Americans, who he says have no idea where their food comes from. It brings him to two key ideas in his work: decay and sterilization. He wants to give his diners a great night with great food, but he can't do it with the kind of food they want, or the kind of food they're used to eating, he said.

"Though I don't, in practice, hold a pistol to the head, that's what my philosophy is about," Renner said. "Paradise is full of wonderful things for you to eat. If you don't eat it here, then you don't go to paradise. You're not worth going."

As much as Renner's work is about waste and consumerism, it is also about having a good time. Bemis curator Hesse McGraw described Renner's work: "The project really capitalizes on the social aspect of coming together for a shared meal."

For an installation he did at the Leo Koenig gallery in New York City, Renner brought together people from various walks of life for weekly test dinners.

Renner didn't know anyone in New York when he arrived for a sixth-

month stay with his family; so he invited the milkman, butcher and grocer to his first meal. Renner and his family invited friends and random people they met on the street.

"These test dinners went until four or five in the morning," he said. "I was often asleep. I would wake up in the morning and they were still here. There was a director of a bank sitting next to a homeless man. They talked about something besides food, but food brought them together."

The six dinners Renner put on in New York featured the same blend of high meets low. Plates paired wasabi caviar and calf tongue and risotto wrapped in gold leaf.

At Friday's opening, the large table had yet to be set. We'll have to wait to learn if Renner's thrifting adventures led him to enough dishes to serve what's likely to be a meaty — and memorable — meal. ,

Paul Renner's The Omaha Diner runs at the Bemis Center, 12th and Leavenworth, through June 6. He will present two dinners; a Gastosophical Journey through Europe Friday, May 8 at 7 p.m. and a Gastosophical Journey through the United States Saturday, May 9 at 7 p.m. The dinners were sold out at the time of publication, though more seats may become available. Dinner is \$120 per person, \$85 for Bemis members. For more information, email joel@bemiscenter.org or call 341.7130.

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