

BUTTERCUP

Restaurateur returns with novel take on chowder and ice cream

Buttercup prepares chowders in a way I'd never imagined: to order.

After stepping up to the counter and choosing from the four varieties, owner Julie Barker turns to the gas stove, puts down a pot and gets to work. Under the industrial burners are drawers full of ingredients — sliced potatoes, celery, carrots and so on. Into the pot they go, along with spices, cream and all the rest. Then, into the New Traditional Clam Chowder (\$10 for 16 ounces, \$18 for 32 ounces), go the clams, which have been heretofore kept raw.

"They cook very quickly," Barker says of clams, "and this way they don't get rubbery."

Indeed, served steaming hot and finished in the bowl with a dollop of red pepper butter, the substantial strips of locally sourced razor clams emerge with robust texture. The vegetables too

are firm, fresh and crisp. In a buttery cream base the tastes of the individual components maintain more of their individual character than in traditionally prepared chowder, where everything melds into a homogenized paste. It's a novel approach and, my goodness, does it work.

Considering Barker's history, perhaps Buttercup's success is no surprise. Before opening on April 3, Barker was behind two renowned North Coast eateries: She spent 16 years as the proprietor of Manzanita's Blue Sky Cafe before moving on to open Bread and Ocean, a bakery, deli and caterer, in 2003. Barker sold Bread and Ocean last winter then got right back to work on Buttercup.

With counter service and no real dining area, Buttercup does two things, chowder and ice cream, expertly. The decision to focus narrowly, Barker says, was driven by past experience: At her prior restaurants everyone wanted chowder and ice cream.

The challenge of starting anew seems to inspire Barker. Both the Blue Sky Cafe and Bread and Ocean were successful — and even beloved — under her watch. (After she left, Blue Sky reportedly flagged.) To nourish her muse at Buttercup, she plans an ever-changing menu, heavy on collaboration. Each month she plans to work with local chefs and providers to create new chowders and ice creams.

May's ice cream collaboration, in conjunction with local massage therapist and food blogger Dana Zia, is Carrot Cake served in a cinnamon cone. The Halloween-colored dessert features chunks of cake and an interesting sea salt balance to its sweetness (it was a bit salty for my taste).

Many of Buttercup's ice cream flavors (\$4 for a scoop, \$6 for two) are exquisitely complex. Kaffir lime leaves tickle the Mango Sorbet, and the Sour Cream Strawberry Rhubarb finishes with a zing. The varieties are myriad, and Barker keeps the samples coming. Into a demo cup she added Marshmallow to the Mango Sorbet and the combination was sublime, the sharp fruitiness of the mango playing off the smooth, soft marshmallow cream — this, coming from a person who dislikes regular marshmallows.

Along with lovely, layered "semifreddos" (a frozen mousse, \$5) and teeming ice cream sandwiches (\$4 or \$5), Buttercup offers vegan waffle cones and flavors, including the Mango and a marvelously textured Toasted Coconut w/ chocolate shards. The flavors are so round and rich you'd be hard-pressed to tell they're vegan.

Same goes for the Thai Veggie Chowder (\$8 for 16 ounces, \$15 for 32 ounces). Its coconut



Buttercup in Nehalem makes chowder, such as traditional clam chowder, left, and Thai veggie chowder, right to order.

At Buttercup, vegan options abound, such as these vegan Mango Sorbet and Toasted Coconut ice creams in a vegan waffle cone.

base is every bit as creamy as those using milk, though it reminds more of a curry than a chowder (and that's not a bad thing!). A sumptuous mix of veggies, including carrots, cabbage, asparagus, leeks, fried shallots and more, the Veggie Chowder is a textural delight. Shitake mushrooms even recreate a clam's texture.

Truly, Buttercup's vegetarian and vegan options are more than compromised afterthoughts — they're every bit as hearty, rich and well-thought-out as the options for omnivores. (Such results, says Barker, are the product of many years in a relationship with a vegan.)

The carnivorous, however, might also try the Prawn & Fennel Chowder (\$10 for 16 ounces, \$18 for 32 ounces). With a generous helping of sliced prawns, it was simple, slightly sweet, subtly — but expertly — spiced and, on a cold, gray day, supremely satisfying. (For what it's

worth: I took the Prawn Chowder to go and re-heated it the next day at home. Pre-made chowders for quick take-out are also available in a refrigerator).

All of Buttercup's chowders are gluten-free. (Rather than thickened with flour, the broth gets its scant viscosity from flecks of softened potatoes). Those seeking gluten can get it from the bread, which comes complimentary with every chowder from Barker's former home, Bread and Ocean.

Indeed, after spending nearly three decades running other restaurants on the North Coast, Barker knows all the best regional sources. They are displayed proudly: Misty Meadow Farm eggs, Jacobsen salts, R-evolution garden produce, Community Supported Fishery, and so on. Barker bestows particular reverence on her milk purveyor: Bennett Family Farm.

Besides fundamentally great tastes, Buttercup makes chowder to order that everyone — those with allergies or dietary restrictions, and picky eaters — can partake. It's a different approach, but thanks to top-notch, local ingredients and an experienced hand, the results are astounding. Traditional makers should take heed: At Buttercup, Barker is — once again — blazing a brand new trail.



mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • mouth@coastweekend.com

Buttercup

Rating: ★★★★★

35815 U.S. Highway 101 N., Nehalem

503-368-2469

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday.

PRICE: \$ — Bowls of chowder with bread cost \$8 to \$10.

SERVICE: Take-out

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Marvelous. Some of the best vegan dishes on the North Coast. Chowders are also gluten-free.

DRINKS: None.

KEY TO RATINGS

- ★ below average
- ★★ average
- ★★★ good
- ★★★★ excellent
- ★★★★★ outstanding, the best in the Columbia-Pacific region