

Life *in the* Valley

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DINING REVIEW



PHOTOS BY BROOKE JACKSON-GLIDDEN / STATESMAN JOURNAL
The chicken club sandwich at The MarKum Inn is an addition that came with the restaurant's new lunch hours. The sandwich can be ordered any time of day.

MarKum is best pizza place found in middle of nowhere

100-year-old restaurant near Silverton has been revamped

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STATESMAN JOURNAL

The MarKum Inn, a wood-paneled steakhouse outside Silverton in the tiny farming community of Marquam, is the only sit-down restaurant for miles, a destination for farmers and ranchers around the area. Their fathers ate here, and before that, their grandfathers witnessed various owners struggle and succeed as the restaurant survived fires, depressions, recessions and bad management.

In the 100-plus years, The MarKum has been many things: a notoriously sexist saloon, a family joint, a country hotel, a tavern. The restaurant was known for its massive burgers and baked potatoes, washed down with unfussy beer. In the '50s, people played cards and smoked over drinks and red meat.

The restaurant was revived after a 2014 fire by a gaggle of outsiders: a Californian manager, a Midwestern owner, a Southern chef. They introduced dishes that made some hesitant: a butternut squash hummus? At the MarKum?

Indeed, the MarKum is less down-home these days.

"The burger is like, half the size, but the fries are good," bemoans a man to his friend, both in boots still caked in mud. Others note the change in the "perfect potato," a MarKum hand-me-down that perhaps should have stayed in the past.

Though it is not the MarKum Inn you may have grew up with, if you order right, it's better.

Old favorites

The bar is usually crowded, a basketball game playing while men drink beer (like the restaurant's exclusive Seven Brides blonde). The construction outside will soon be a patio, sure to be crowded as the weather warms. For now, cozy is easy to achieve, as wood-fired ovens warm the lodge-like restaurant.

Farmers have kept The MarKum Inn alive for years, in more ways than one. They're the primary customers, but also the suppliers: Diggin' Roots organic Marquam vegetables appear in calzones and hummus, and Coleman Ranch in Molalla raises cattle for the restaurant's daily steak list.

The quality of this steak is a testament to rancher Steve Coleman, who ranches cows that become wild-tasting New York strips. The MarKum Inn buys whole cows from him, cutting steaks that age at Lonely Lane Farms in Mt. Angel.

If you go

The MarKum Inn and Muddy Boots Bar:
★★★★

Where: 36903 Highway 213 (outside Silverton)

When: 11:45 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Tuesdays-Thursdays and Sundays and 11:45 to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays

What to order: Roast Beef Sandwich, Meat Lover's Pizza (really, any pizza), Butternut Hummus

What you'll spend: Appetizers \$5 to \$11, entrees \$9 to \$17, steaks to market (around \$20 to \$40)

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(Four stars: exceptional; three stars: good; two stars: fair; one star: poor)

Each steak is very simply grilled with salt and pepper, but despite ordering medium rare, some cuts arrive with a rosy-pink center — the perfect medium rare — while others, like a dangerously lean sirloin, were egregiously overcooked to the point of felt-like, mealy, Donald-Trump-pleasing well done.

General manager Julio Valera said these steaks are intended to taste like beef and flame and nothing else; in this effort, the restaurant succeeds, but I could do the same at home (as soon as I win Coleman's trust and buy all his steaks).

Beef lovers should order the Roast Beef Sandwich instead. French Dip purists who scoff at additional spreads or snub any unnecessary vegetation will faint at the sight of this game-changer, which hides a swipe of Prime Rib-style horseradish sauce and grilled onions under a curtain of melted cheese. It's a French dip with a country twang, and it won't easily leave my memory.

New hits

The New MarKum has some issues with labeling dishes. A promised wedge salad that comes with all the steaks is not a wedge but rather a tossed mixed green salad (Valera says this change was recent, as customers didn't like the wedge). Naan is really a fluffy cloud of pizza dough, and butternut squash hummus ... well, I'm not sure what butternut squash hummus is. But I like it.

Butternut hummus, a chunky paste with tumbling fried chickpeas and cheese, arrives with a giant pizza dough blob. The dish had me questioning a lot of



The MarKum Inn recently reopened after a 2014 fire.

my conceptions surrounding hummus. Squash replaces traditional pureed chickpeas, but the final product retains hummus' other essential ingredients: tahini, olive oil, lemon juice.

What does a hummus require to be a hummus? Chickpeas? Tahini? It definitely doesn't require fried sage, though it goes quite well with butternut squash puree. The accompanying bread is definitely not naan, but it's fluffy and hot, and when you rip in, steam billows until your face is flush. It's a visceral, unique dish for a country steakhouse, even if it's not what it says it is.

New Jersey has fat sandwiches. Missouri has Gerbers. Illinois has horse-shoes, and when owner Mark Burnett moved here from Illinois, he brought the state's sandwich with him. The MarKum Inn's version of the sandwich piles meat, fries and cheese sauce on a piece of Texas toast. The menu recommends you pair your sandwich with "a cardiologist on speed dial," which is not a bad idea. With tender fried chicken, the Horse Shoe is a good sloppy drunk food, though I'm not sure it will "change my life" the way the menu promises. My boyfriend disagrees.

The real reason to visit the MarKum is the pizzas, flatbreads with crispy-on-the-bottom, zero-droop crust. The inside is fluffy, flavorful, fragrant with yeast, like walking into a bakery at 6 a.m. The taste of char from the wood-fired pizza oven is present but doesn't insinuate the pizza is overcooked. It flirts with sweet tomato sauce and toppings like local pepperoni and ricotta. Options range from fancy to down home, from a white pizza with smoked sea salt and arugula to a

meat lover's with ground beef and smoked ham. So far, it's the best pizza I've had in the mid-valley.

Final thoughts

The MarKum Inn is not Marquam Tavern, or any of the other iterations of the restaurant. The restaurant often boasts that it's 100-plus years old, but really, each time it's been something a little different. This change, albeit a big change, is a good one.

I've heard the frustrations from the tables around me, complaints on the changes in size and the speed of service. The new MarKum is not fast food or trying to impress with size, but no points are lost because of it in my book.

You might not expect a rural steakhouse to have the best pizza around, but then again, you don't expect a restaurant to survive three fires and 100 years.

The MarKum Inn, instead, invested in the community. It proudly sourced vegetables from Marquam. It uses local beef and lets it speak for itself (however I feel about that). Sauces, breads and pizza dough are made in-house. And still, the restaurant listens to its customers, changing restaurant fundamentals based on community feedback.

The new ownership has adjusted the menu, prices and hours since the restaurant opened.

"We try to respond to the customer," said Valera, sitting at the bar during a slow, lazy lunch hour. "We lowered the price, we added lunch items. ... But we don't make our food in three seconds or less. Wood-fired food takes longer, but try it. It tastes better."