

DUCKING THE COLD

Wild Duck Café heats things up BY ANDY VALENTINE

It may have been the driest winter on record for a while there, but that doesn't mean it's warm. Au contraire: This year's mercurial weather has meant that a lot of the time it's still nail-bitingly, teeth chatteringly cold outside, and humans need more than fro-yo to get through a lunch break.

Enter Wild Duck Café, the East Campus sports restaurant keeping it chill when it comes to warmth.

Some may know the joint by its former name — the Villard St. Café — and the management team remains, but Wild Duck has a new menu of mid-range prices and delicious ways to body slam the cold right out of your bones.

"There's just no comparison to fresh ground beef when you're eating a gourmet hamburger," says Bob Jensen, Wild Duck's jovial and personable manager, as I sink my teeth into a spicy jalapeño burger, piled high with cream cheese and whole jalapeño peppers. "And those onions came out right on the money." Here Jensen points to the unique creation that is "Haystack Onions," a thin-sliced take on onion rings that arrives looking more like delicious wisps of angel's hair than anything else.

That's the name of the game, seemingly, at Wild Duck; it's all the comforts of sports-bar food (wings, soup, burgers, etc.) with a twist on each item that makes it seem new. For example, the wing appetizer comes with a choice of spicy sauces beyond the generic buffalo (Vietnamese garlic sauce, et al.), and the beer cheese soup is one of the sharpest, most beer-tasting soups in the city. Add sweet potato tots and you'll be wearing an internal food blanket in no time.

Wild Duck also has a catering service that's been in business since 1996, and this acts as a lucrative side-project as well as a ready supplier for the restaurant's ingredients. With a solid base like this, it's unsurprising that the folks at Wild Duck have fancy plans for the future: Among them will be the installation of a 12-foot Chef's Table, an exclusive seating area allowing patrons a front row seat while the chef prepares their food.

"The table is going to be made of Koa," Jensen says, divulging a



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great passion for Oregon sports as he launches into a story involving the formation of his friendship with Max Unger's grandfather in Hawaii (Unger is a former offensive tackle for UO's football team). "We're going to make an event called Unger for Hunger."

While the event is not projected to come to fruition until next fall, the concept itself is a great idea: With Max Unger's influence, Wild Duck Café hopes to create

a benefit — including a ukulele auction and dinner — that will aid Food for Lane County.

Beating the cold may seem a daunting task, especially considering the fact that the heavens have finally opened, but when you've got choices like these, who cares? It won't take long before your belly is stoked and your body is bathed in warmth. ■

Wild Duck Café is located at 1419 Villard St., 485-3825.

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