

THE BOWPICKER

With tuna just off the coast, now's the best time of year for Bowpicker's fish and chips

As it was awarded "Best Fish and Chips" in Coast Weekend's 2014 Readers' Choice Awards, you're likely well aware of the Bowpicker. But here's something you might not know:

There's no better time of year to eat there than right now.

According to the jovial staff, the albacore tuna that the Bowpicker fries up is caught nearest to Astoria at the end of June and into early July. In that short span, tuna can be fished as close as eight miles out. (At other times of the year that distance stretches into the hundreds.)

Whether that proximity makes a significant difference in taste remains to be seen. And, just to be clear: All of Bowpicker's tuna is flash-frozen on the boat on its way to market. The staff noted that nearly all fish comes that way, and proudly added that Bowpicker's is never re-frozen. Anyway, for the next few weeks, the sourcing will be hyper-local.

Now, if Bowpicker is new to you — as it was to me — a little background:

Located on Duane Street, overlooking the river and the Maritime Museum, the Bowpicker is essentially a food cart. Well, a food boat — one that, according to the paperwork posted on the hull, is still a certified fishing vessel. But let's not get it twisted: This bowpicker — named for a vintage fishing vessel where the gillnetted fish were lifted in over the bow — remains largely land-locked. Re-fitted with fryers, sinks and so on, it's here to cook rather than catch.

And what it cooks is simple: fish and chips. That's it. Bowpicker does one thing and does it well. A half-order (three pieces) is \$8, and a whole order (five pieces) is \$10. As a value proposition it's a no-brainer; get the whole order.

The five pieces of tuna were relatively uniform, about the size of a credit card, and thick. The beer battered crust was crunchy, substantial and excellent. It wasn't oily, it didn't fall off and it didn't get soggy. The tuna inside was perfectly cooked, though its flavor was more familiar than something to flip for. Served steaming hot, the warmth satisfied — a little extra insulation against the heavy breeze should you choose to eat at the few nearby picnic tables.

The sauces, however — ketchup and tarar — left much to be desired. Both came

from a bottle, and not necessarily a fancy one. Really, they were about as generic as it gets, with more preservatives than seasoning.

The Bowpicker also offered an array of hot sauces, malt vinegar and so on, but again: nothing special or extraordinary. It's too bad, because the exquisitely cooked tuna deserves better than to be slathered in Heinz (or whatever it is). Think about it: If you've got a Ferrari, you want to fill it with premi-

If you've got a Ferrari, you want to fill it with premium. Same goes for Bowpicker: Some homemade, thoughtful or exotic dipping sauces would go a long way.



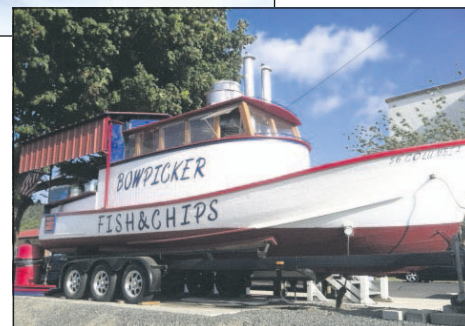
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The fries, which seemed to come from the freezer aisle, suffered a similar fate. There's just nothing special about them, nor were there enough. Indeed, it's not hard to imagine a starving worker left wanting after finishing a full order.

But working class lunches don't seem to butter Bowpicker's bread. Really, it's hard to see how they could, as the almost ever-present line can snake on in upwards of an hour. (I was relatively fortunate — my visit took in the neighborhood of 15 minutes.) Also, be forewarned: The Bowpicker



only takes cash. (It'd really be a shame to shuffle in line only to discover your debit card a worthless hunk of plastic.)

Indeed, the waits are a real thing. Riding a wave of hype almost befitting of Portland, Bowpicker has become a sought-after destination for food tourists. In a way it makes sense: The boat is quaint and cute, and while overlooking the water and working ships it wraps together a romantic notion of fishing culture. That said, if I had to wait much longer than I did I would've left confused, if not disappointed. Bowpicker's fish was good, but it didn't knock my boots off.

To that end, I'm hoping to do a round-up of the best fish and chips on the North Coast later this summer. And while I'm not quite ready to join Coast Weekend readers and anoint Bowpicker as the pinnacle, it certainly deserves to be in the conversation.

In the meantime, if you've yet to try Bowpicker's beer-battered tuna — or even if you're a loving regular — there's no better time than now; the tuna are swimming just off the coast.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

Bowpicker

Rating: ★ ★ ★

1634 Duane St., Astoria

503-791-2942

www.bowpicker.com

Hours: "11ish" to 6 p.m., Wednesday to Sunday, weather permitting or until they run out of fish. See website for closures.

PRICE: \$ - \$10 for a full order, \$8 for a half-order.

SERVICE: Friendly, but lines and wait can be excessive.

VEGETARIAN OPTIONS: French fries.

DRINKS: Soda, bottled water.

KEY TO RATINGS

- ★ poor
- ★★ below average
- ★★★ good & worth returning
- ★★★★ excellent
- ★★★★★ outstanding, the best in the Columbia-Pacific region