

# Sweet Basil's

## Cannon Beach eatery delivers fresh ingredients

It was a gorgeous summer evening, the shadows just growing long. With clams and Osso Buco before me and an iced mug of beer at my side, Dr. John came over the stereo. The rich, indulgent tastes coupled with the canonical New Orleans singer's raspy swamp funk whisked me away, far from Cannon Beach.

Which, I imagine, is pretty much what owner and chef John Sowa intended. While Sowa originally hails from New York, he studied in Louisiana under one of the original celebrity chefs, Paul Prudhomme. After a decade or so in the region, Sowa found his way to the North Coast, where he opened Little Bayou in Seaside. It was big, boasted live music regularly, a lively array of hot sauce and a decor all befitting of the Big Easy. In 2007, though, Sowa and his wife felt it time to downsize, so he moved on to open Sweet Basil's in Cannon Beach.

At first Sowa planned to do only lunch. He found a small place with a smaller kitchen. It was — and in many ways still is — less equipped than the average home. (Rather than a stovetop, Sweet Basil's uses three portable hotplate/camping burners. As such, the menu notes that because of the limitations, food might take awhile, though on my trips the speed was just fine.)

Demand quickly grew. "Lunch was poppin'," Sowa told me. So he attempted to expand, albeit incrementally, by offering tapas but quickly found that small plates weren't what hungry tourists wanted. And so he returned to his bayou beginnings with a full dinner menu. But he did so with a strong and unwavering sense, knowing exactly what he wanted — and what he didn't.

For dinner, my companion and I began with the Clams Mateo (\$13.50). In a white wine sauce and loaded with bacon, tomato, caramelized onions and herbs, they were as much a pleasure to look at as they were to eat. (Indeed, with clams the process can be just as enjoyable as the taste.) A table adjacent to ours devoured their own bowl so fervently that they quickly ordered a second. "We had one order and we just thought: hey, we're having another," the wide-eyed diner told me. "They're amazing." I agreed.

My companion and I then shared entrées, the Seafood Jambalaya (\$22.50) and the Pork Shank Osso Buco (\$23.50). Of the two, the taste (and presentation) of the Osso Buco towered above the Jambalaya. It was marvelously plated, standing on its head, bones jutting skyward out of a thick tomato sauce underneath which sat the richest, creamiest parme-

san-tinged polenta the world has ever known. Removing the caramelized meat from the bones was a delight, and wrapped in the center it remained juicy and steaming hot.

The Jambalaya was less memorable, its red sauce almost bland by comparison. The seafood in the dish — shrimp, crawfish, salmon and crab — was fine, though not outstanding. The sausage offered a significant back-of-the-tongue spice. My companion and I shared the two dishes (neither of which was outlandishly portioned) and made a point not to over-eat. We took left-overs, and yet still both felt significantly slowed for at least a good hour after finishing, as if both the brain and body were operating at around 60 percent. (In part, I blame that devilishly creamy polenta...)

The lunch menu, however, was much leaner. From it I tried first the Vegetarian Reuben (\$9.95), an idea so seemingly anathema to the original — it exists because of corned beef — I had to know: Was it folly or innovation? Happily, I found it to be the latter. Thinly cut, peppered Tofurkey adequately appropriated the texture of pastrami, and the remainder of the ingredients — lightly toasted wheat bread, sauerkraut,



Sweet Basil's Vegetarian Reuben features thinly cut, peppered Tofurkey instead of pastrami.

The Mouth found this salad to be fresh and filling, featuring a base of organic greens, cranberries, walnuts, apples and chicken (as well as a few cucumbers and some tomatoes on the side, which had no business being on the plate).

Swiss cheese and a lightly sweet Thousand Island dressing — were spot on. Indeed, unless in the midst of an insatiable craving for red meat, the Vegetarian Reuben is a worthy trade — your gastrointestinal tract will thank you.

As the menu noted, the Italian Panini (\$8.95), is "Simply tomatoes, basil pesto, mozzarella and provolone." Indeed, standard as it was, it sang. It was buttery, oily, full of pesto and balanced by bright tomatoes. (Both sandwiches were served with two or three bites worth of mixed greens, topped with a smidgen of house-made roasted tomato dressing, and both could be made vegan with soy cheese.)



Finally I had a salad so familiar there ought to name it for it. On a base of organic greens were cranberries, walnuts, apples and chicken (as well as a few cucumbers and some tomatoes on the side, which had no business being on the plate). With a mango-lime dressing that was equal parts of each, the chicken on the Roasted Chicken and Apple Salad (\$14.50) was perhaps the least appealing ingredient (besides those stubborn tomatoes). The meat was dry and unseasoned. Overall though, the plate was fresh and filling. It also differed from the menu.

In fact, I found two different menus in Sweet Basil's — the one posted on the window differed ever so slightly from the one on my table. The distinctions were almost meaningless. For instance, on the salad one menu said it came with pecans, another said almonds. I received walnuts. To me this isn't so much carelessness as Sowa's commitment to putting the best and freshest ingredients available that are befitting of the dish.

And that's pretty much Sweet Basil's in a nutshell: Put yourself in Sowa's hands, and occasionally he'll carry you away.

# mouth

## OF THE COLUMBIA

### COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • [mouth@coastweekend.com](mailto:mouth@coastweekend.com)

#### Sweet Basil's

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

271 N. Hemlock St., Cannon Beach

503-436-1539

**Hours:** Lunch is served from 11:30a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Wednesday to Monday. Dinner is served 5 to 9 p.m. Wednesday to Monday.

**Price:** \$\$ – Entrées hover around \$20, though lighter fare is available.

**Service:** Attentive but structurally quaint

**Vegetarian / Vegan options:** Thoughtful and available, though not overwhelming

**Drinks:** An extensive selection of wine, as well as beer, coffee and tea.

#### KEY TO RATINGS

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