

Merry Time Bar & Grill

An old-school dive with an awesome happy hour burger

Despite a Bloody Mary that comes with a steak, the Merry Time Bar & Grill's gem is its \$5 happy hour burger. It's one of the better deals — and the best burgers — I've found in my short tenure as the Mouth. It's also emblematic of the place.

The Astoria stalwart is a dive, and that didn't change when Terry and Todd Robinett bought it late last year. The restaurant is dark at almost any hour of the day. It's cavernous and carpeted. A mash of old beer adverts and bygone sports memorabilia line the walls. There are loads of TVs, and they turn the sound up when local teams play. Pinball machines rattle and clink, video lottery slots twinkle, and pool balls clack.

Despite its dank, aged veneer, the Merry Time isn't dingy (let's not talk about the bathrooms though). Staff take care of the interior surfaces; it's necessary because as much as the Merry Time is a watering hole, it's a place people come to eat — and the happy hour burger has to be a big reason why.

The first clue is in the menu: Burgers are "cooked to medium temperature." And in case you miss it, the server will reiterate: How do you want it cooked? While allowing that I wasn't afraid of a little pink, I opted to let the cook decide. What I got was ideal.

At \$5 the happy hour burger comes a la carte, stacked teetering, held in place with a toothpick. The presentation accentuates the innards — with a slice of tomato, onion and shredded lettuce it isn't a king's ransom of accoutrements. (For that, see the Merry Monster, \$12.) It is, however, well seasoned and prepared. The handmade one-third-pound patty was cooked just right: thick, juicy, salty and just pink in the middle.

With it, I added an order of calamari (\$3) also from the happy hour menu. (Available from 4 to 7 p.m. every gosh darn day.) They were real, not reconstituted, and though the calamari could've been left in the fryer a moment longer to crisp the breading, I'd take 'em over fries as a side anytime. On this first trip I had a microbrew (also a dollar-off during happy hour). All together — the burger, the calamari and the beer — were just \$10 before tip. I left feeling almost as if I'd gotten away with something.

My second trip to the Merry Time coincided with a Beavers football game and, despite the Oregon State team's sorry stature, a number of logo-clad fans turned out (then mostly tuned out). As such, wings were in order, as well as a Po Boy. As she did each visit, Jeanie, the omnipresent and ever-jovial server, asked: Would I like the food in any specific order?

I began with the wings. The eight of them (\$8), in classic hot sauce, lacked distinction. Mostly supple with occasional snippets of crispy skin, they tended to be small. The sauce was elementary, likely a base of Franks Red Hot. The blue cheese was almost as watery as the accompanying celery. And as the wings come only in paltry orders of eight, I can't recommend them for a hungry group. They'll flutter away before you know it.

The Po Boy (\$9) was another story. On Jeanie's recommendations I had it with prawns (as opposed to fish, calamari or chicken) and fries. The fries, she told me, were house cut. (The tots come frozen in bags.) In both cases she was dead on. The fries, with skin, reminded of actual potatoes, and the breaded, deep-fried shrimp were a delight. Indeed, I embraced everything about the Po Boy — the slaw and creamy remoulade, lightly crisp shrimp, and the neatly stacked slices of bright tomato and sharp pickle. The tastes came together so well — until they fell apart. The toasted, buttered hoagie was woefully thin, and the innards kept escaping. But when I took the time to arrange the perfect bite, my goodness.

I returned once more, needing to experi-



ence that Bloody Mary that came with a steak. Again, Jeanie wondered: How would I like it cooked? "Chef's choice," I said. "Let them do their thing." To the order I added a salad, the Grilled Veggie (\$9), which was highlighted both by Jeanie and the menu.

First came the drink, which was as advertised: horseradish forward, an early but not overwhelming spice. I appreciated the pint glass (by itself the drink is just \$5), but was disappointed the steak did not come atop as a garish garnish (but one can dream, no?). Instead there was the usual: a green bean, pick-

Left: The \$5 happy hour burger at Merry Time is seasoned and prepared well.



A Po Boy sandwich, featuring delightful deep-fried shrimp, is a good meal paired with house-cut fries. Watch out for the thin hoagie roll, though.

led jalapeño, green olive and lemon.

In the meantime I received the salad, along with porter vinaigrette dressing. The veggies — mostly mushrooms, onions and a few red peppers — were fresh off the grill, resting on a bed of spinach and sprinkled with gorgonzola. For the first few bites I was in love. The dressing was its own thing: nutty, only hinting a vinaigrette in the aftertaste. With the mushrooms and caramelized onions it was quite hearty, savory and gave the impression of heavy protein. As I went, though, the luster dulled. The grilled veggies — and there were loads of them — were covered in oil, and that oil eventually coated the spinach, giving the dish an unappealing soggy and shine. Though the initial dive perked me up, it didn't finish well.

Finally the steak came. It was bloody, with ribbons of pink in the center. At first I thought I wouldn't need any dressing, save for maybe a bit of salt. Upon further inspection, though, the top sirloin proved a little bland, and needing of a lift. For the most part, the cut was lean, and in tandem with the cocktail it might make a rather compelling breakfast of champions on game day — albeit for a particular kind of champion.

Despite that playful flourish, though, the Merry Time isn't about cheeky innovation. It ain't cute. It's gruff, blustery and old school. The focus is value — both of cost and preparation. And that being the case, I can't imagine veering too far from that excellent happy hour burger. (Though that shrimp Po Boy isn't shrinking either...)

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

Merry Time Bar & Grill

Rating: ★★☆☆

995 Marine Drive, Astoria

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merrytimebar.com

HOURS: 8 a.m. to midnight Monday to Thursday; 8 a.m. to 1 a.m. Friday; 10 a.m. to 1 a.m. Saturday; 10 a.m. to midnight Sunday. Happy hour is 4 to 7 p.m. every day.

PRICE: \$ — Most entrées around \$10, but happy hour deals abound.

SERVICE: Fun, friendly and prompt

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: A few salads and sides

DRINKS: Full bar, soft drinks, coffee

KEY TO RATINGS

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