

IRON MOUTH

Iron Chef Goes Coastal came and went, and the Mouth of the Columbia offers up its picks for People's Choice

Some 600 of you just shared a meal with the Mouth. Indeed, I was on hand at Iron Chef Goes Coastal. And since y'all got the opportunity to weigh in, voting for the People's Choice, Best Dessert and Best Table awards, it seemed only fair that I join the party.

But before ladling out my own highlights and criticisms, it's worth noting: The charitable event raised over \$40,000 for United Way. A significant portion of that came from ticket sales — folks who not only wanted to watch the competition, but to sample plates from the nine participating restaurants. The eateries came from up and down the Columbia-Pacific coast, from the Cannon Beach Hardware Store and Public House to the The Cove in Long Beach, Washington, donating time and product. All deserve commendation for doing so — preparing a dish for some 600 people is neither cheap nor easy. So hats off to you all.

But to paint the restaurants' participation as purely altruistic would be a slight cover-up — there is intense advertising value in being afforded an audience of 600 hungry, food-interested folks. As such, exhibiting restaurants would be wholeheartedly foolish to put anything but their best foot forward. After all, this too was a competition — the first and second place winners will field a contestant in next year's Iron Chef main event.

As selected by the attendees, Drina Daisy took top honor in the People's Choice competition. The Cove was runner-up. The two restaurants were separated by just 10 votes.

The Mouth, however, doesn't quite agree.

I appreciated the breadth of The Cove's Marionberry Pork Mole, which mingled sweet and savory flavors with succulent, tender, slow-cooked meat, a dark and fruity sauce, chalky cheese and crisp chips. It was served up in what resembled a martini glass and topped with a marionberry, almost collapsing under its own weight. The Mouth was less enchanted, however, by Drina Daisy.

To be sure: The presentation, complete with nattily-attired servers, was resplendent, a sumptuous and worthy celebration of Bosnian heritage. (The restaurant should've won Best Table.) Drina Daisy's booth boasted the longest lines of the night. The Mouth, who's had issues with the Astoria restaurant's flagging timeliness (see Coast Weekend, May 14, 2015) couldn't help but chuckle. Unlike its competitors, Drina Daisy offered not one

but three dishes: Goulash, Sirnica and Čevapi. They were also self-serve.

The Goulash — a braised beef with carrots, bell peppers and onions — was of fine, stew-like consistency but wildly over-salted, as if some teenage rascal had played a prank on the chef by unscrewing the salt-shaker lid. The Sirnica, an eggy, cheesy pastry wrapped in thin, flaky filo dough, was also quite salty (much like it is in the restaurant). I found the Čevapi a bit odd. It featured a cube of minced beef along with a raw white onion on cold white bread. Prepared differently than the traditional dish, which is cooked together almost like pocket, it was more akin to a sandwich desperately seeking sauce.

Now, I know Drina Daisy is beloved. And having once already heard the feedback after my initial, trepidatiously critical review, I can already hear the howls: "He's got it in for Drina Daisy!" That just couldn't be further from the truth. As with the brick and mortar, a few minimal but thoughtful tweaks would do wonders. The foundation is there, it's just got a crack or two that need sealing. Truly, all I want is for more worldly culinary traditions to find a home on the North Coast, and that includes Drina Daisy.

(And for those of you wondering: Is the Mouth too sensitive to salt? Nope. I compared notes with a handful of chefs and food-forward folks at the event, and they said the same: The goulash was stridently salty.)

Had I filled out a ballot (alas, I did not), I would've put Sweet Basil's and the Pickled Fish on top.



At Iron Chef Goes Coastal, the Cove served a Marionberry Pork Mole, which mingled sweet and savory flavors.



The Mouth would have liked to see Sweet Basil's Cafe, which served a rich Chicken Tchopituoulas, on top in the Iron Chef People's Choice competition.



Of everything I tried at Iron Chef, Sweet Basil's Chicken Tchopituoulas — roasted buttermilk brined chicken thighs and Cajun mashed potatoes in a chanterelle cream sauce — offered the most richness per square molecule. Swimming with heavy creams and the chanterelles, it tasted downright expensive. Named for a street in New Orleans, Tchopituoulas is a Cajun dish of French bloodlines. And I must add I'd love to see Sweet Basil's chef John Sowa, who studied under one of the original celebrity chefs, Paul Prudhomme, compete in Iron Chef Goes Coastal.

Pickled Fish's Wild Mushroom Bread Pudding was satisfying in a different way — a

comfort with perky zest. It was simultaneously smooth and tangy. Warm, pillowy and hearty, it encompassed a traditional bread pudding with hints of exquisite, sharp spicing. It included a savory blackberry sauce, fennel, coriander jam and boletus dust (that's from a mushroom). Pickled Fish's Bread Pudding was like a party of old friends where a few new ones showed up and everyone got along swimmingly.

Otherwise, I quite enjoyed Cannon Beach Hardware's Curry Clam Chowder, which split the difference right down the middle and had just the right kick of spice. I found the Bridgewater Bistro's pineapple Pork Mojo under-seasoned and the plantains mushy. As an Italian eatery, Fulio's decision to serve an Asian-inspired bite with teriyaki and wonton cracker was a head-scratcher.

But it paled in the shadow of the trainwreck that was Maggie's on the Prom, who whiffed wholly on an attempt at molecular gastronomy. (The interactive science experiment, however, did win them "Best Table.") Regardless of whether or not the eye-droppers created noodles before our eyes (they did, though quite unsubstantially), the encapsulating Duck Consommé had to be worthwhile and it wasn't — it tasted more like lukewarm tap water and beef stock.

That Maggie's even tried performing out of the box says something about food on the North Coast — not as much as the rest of the exhibitors, mind you, or the Iron Chefs on Main Stage, who created dishes that were fully experiential, meant not only to look at but to nourish and enjoy. Indeed, food on the North Coast is on the rise.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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