

Street 14 Café

In October, Street 14 Café began a week-end dinner service. And while just getting out of the gates, it's been a promising start. Indeed, the meals I've enjoyed beneath the glow of that neon red "Coffee Shop" sign have been some of the most finely prepared, freshest and most tantalizing I've had since taking over as the Mouth this spring.

The transformation of Street 14 from coffee shop to café has been roughly three years in the making. Espresso enthusiasts Micha and Jennifer Cameron-Lattek bought the business in October 2012. Last December they ran a public financing campaign to raise \$25,000 to build a new kitchen and hire a chef. In chunks of \$50 or more, 159 people contributed what are essentially zero-interest loans. Construction began this spring and was completed in September.

As described in their financing pitch, Street 14 hoped to "serve more locally and sustainably sourced foods" and that's mostly what they're doing. The menu's list of sources includes some of the North Coast's most renowned producers like Kingfisher and 46 North farms, Skamakowa Farmstead Creamery, Jacobsen Salt and more. Most everything but the animal proteins comes from the region. (Micha Cameron-Lattek says they hope to find local ranchers, too.)

And while you or I or anyone can take top-shelf, fresh ingredients and turn them into something worthwhile, a talented chef can make them transcendent. And that's what Andrew Catalano, who came up at New York's illustrious Gramercy Tavern, is doing. At Street 14 chef Catalano is sharp and inspired. As well as fine tuning, he's responding each week to what's locally available. That much is clear from the menus, which are printed anew for each Thursday-through-Saturday dinner service. One week, for instance, the Braised Pork Belly was accompanied by white beans, rosemary and sunchoke chips; the next it came with beans and preserved tomatillo.

Thus far Street 14 appears determined to do only a few things and do them well. There were just five entrees over the weeks I visited (though I'd consider the Pork Belly a sixth). There's braised chicken, fish, beef, and two vegetarian options — at the time, a spaghetti with locally foraged mushrooms and a black-eyed pea stew.

With little-to-no starchy fillers the entrees are designed to be coursed. (Which is to say: one entree isn't going to fill you up.) Along for the ride are a handful of salads, a trio of crustini, a few obvious odds and ends like bread, cheese and olives, and the lone appetizer, Seared Squid with fingerling potatoes.

On each trip to Street 14, I had two dishes and cleaned every plate — both because they were delectable and modestly sized. I never left wanting, nor syrupy and tired — indeed, I bounced out satiated in the afterglow, my tastebuds still

twinkling. (But I may also have had a midnight snack some hours later.)

I savored the light Petrale Sole (\$15), a flat fish found all along the Pacific coast. It was lightly seared, dripping in brown butter and dotted with capers. While the edges were perfectly and ever-so-slightly crisp, the light fillets hardly required chewing. The accompanying fennel salad was sharp, a briny exponent to the capers that the rich roundness of the brown butter and fish were just enough to buttress.

Then there was the Pork Belly (\$12), whose luscious rivers of melty, fatty flesh were as decadent and drool-worthy as anything on the North Coast. It was exquisitely cooked, the skin flaky and crisp, the innards so succulent as to defy gravity. In the bowl alongside the standing slab was a thin slice that would make traditional bacon sweat with inadequacy.

The white bean and rosemary mélange (along with tidbits of other greens I couldn't quite make out) provided a refuge of lean, earthy decency against the almost gluttonously fatty, salty, delicious pig. The wavy, quarter-sized sunchoke chips, however, added little to the dish that needed neither more salt or crunch. (Which may explain why, the next week, they were no longer on the menu.)

My second visit began with the Marinated



Photo by Joshua Bessex

The Pork Belly and Beet Salad at Street 14 Café.

Beets (\$9). The beets, both traditional wine red and golden, were prepared in a way that melted without removing their essence — these were indeed agreeable beets. They were joined by arugula, hazelnuts and pickled rhubarb, on a bed of chevre, which too had seemingly been softened, perhaps whipped, the goaty bite eased. It tasted delightful as it felt healthy — and, of course, fresh. In the dark room, the nuts could be a bit of jolt. The more welcome surprise was the pickled rhubarb, which resembled a grand new

fruit. While marvelous, the beet salad was small and over too quickly.

I ordered the Hanger Steak (\$19) cooked to the chef's liking. "Have him do his thing," I said. "I'm not scared of a little blood." It arrived sliced; the edges were caramelized and sprinkled with flakes of sea salt. The center was tender and rare. This was a beef that was qualified and thus allowed to speak for itself. It came with Brussels sprouts atop a subtle, creamy celery puree. As intended, the side dishes were evocative of the fall season.

Like everything I ate at Street 14, the steak wasn't trying to re-invent the wheel. The goal, rather, was to be perfectly round.

The food was matched by the feel. It's intimate, hip but not radical. Street 14 would be an equally fine place to carouse with a group and share multiple dishes or have a quiet date. Though the adjacent, essentially private single-tabled room could be a gas, the main dining area still resembles more coffee shop than restaurant, with those damned tall stools and chest-high tables.

It must also be mentioned that the attentive service and pristinely prepared food I received came while the Street 14 was relatively empty. Indeed, the word has yet to get out. So for every bit that this is an exhalation it's also an expectation. Once pressure and monotony set in, here's hoping Street 14 can remain in the moment.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

STREET 14 CAFE

Rating: ★★★★★

1410 Commercial St, Astoria

503-325-5511

www.street14coffee.com

HOURS: Dinner is served from 5 to 9 p.m. Thursday to Saturday

PRICE: \$\$ — Entrees hover between \$12 and \$19 and are portioned to be coursed

SERVICE: Knowledgeable and unpretentious

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Vegetarians should do well, vegans can make it work.

DRINKS: Cocktails, beer, wine, coffee and espresso

KEY TO RATINGS

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