

Big Wave Cafe

Manzanita eatery big on skills and sources, light on surprises

The first thing you'll see upon entering Manzanita's Big Wave Cafe is a chalkboard. Written on it is the available seafood and its source. The salmon, for instance, comes from Astoria, the clams from Willapa Bay, the crab from Garibaldi and so on. One week everything was from the region, save for the scallops and prawns (which aren't normally found in the Northwest).

So kudos to Big Wave for transparency. And also for its preparation: It's sharp enough to set your watch to. But while such by-the-numbers action can make a restaurant good, it takes inspiration, that little "je ne se quois," to make it great. As Anthony Bordain put it in the seminal "Kitchen Confidential," sublime meals surprise you. They take chances. Big Wave Cafe, however, tends to play it safe.

Considering the restaurant is owned by Brian Williams, an executive at Portland's Le Cordon Bleu culinary school, that's a bit of a let down. Indeed, the Big Wave is more a course in line cooking execution than a culinary laboratory or plaything.

Big Wave is also a family affair. Williams' wife, Carol, handles pastries, and his son Sam serves. And, as Sam told me, the crab cake recipe came from his grandmother. The Williams' took over the 40-year-old restaurant some four years ago.

My first trip to the restaurant was my favorite. It was a slow weekday afternoon. Sam pointed me in the direction of the sandwiches. He recommended the

Fried Halibut (\$13.95,) and said he liked to add avocado to his (another \$2). He was right.

The halibut sandwich arrived tall like a tower, stacked teetering like a bistro burger. It felt like a shame to smush it down flat enough to where I could get my mouth around it, but when I did I was ecstatic. The fish — a thick steak from Astoria — was excellently cooked, the breading crunchy, the innards soft and steaming hot. The tartar was sprinkled bright with dill and lemon. A whole cross-section of onion added a crisp snap, the tomato a pang of sweetness, and the avocado a smooth, heavy cream. Indeed, the addition of that avocado balanced the sandwich so ideally I wonder why it isn't on the menu. With it I had the clam chowder (which added another \$2.50 to the base price). With firm cubes of potato and a fine amount of clams that weren't too rubbery, it was

warming, without flourish, and wholly traditional.

I returned on a Saturday night, and the place was bustling, full of families at big tables. Up-tempo dance music played loudly over the stereo, and I found it an odd mix. A little Taylor Swift with your crab cakes? How about Cher? "Do you believeeeeeeve in life after love?"

The crab cakes (\$16 a la carte or \$22.95 as a dinner entrée) were indeed fitting of something grandma would make. They were hearty and comforting, more easygoing than bold. The two hockey puck-sized cakes came with a smoky-sweet chipotle sauce and pinch of seaweed salad. They were breadly and soft with a nice crust, full of crab and a bit of veggie crispness.

I also had an oyster shooter, though I'd have preferred one on the shell. It was enormous, almost too big to chomp and slurp in one fell swoop. (To be sure: smaller oysters are prized and preferred for raw consumption. The big ones are better for frying.)

The rest of the seafood menu failed to hook



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me. I saw daily specials like salmon, and I passed. Something about simply grilled fish, steamed veggies and a baked potato sounded more like a meal for dieting or triathlon prep than something you pay \$25 for on a weekend. Nothing wrong with it. Good to be healthy, eat well, all that. But you can't say it's exciting. I was drawn instead by the sandwiches.

The Hot Club House (\$11.95) more resembled a sub than its namesake. The Big Wave replaces the pointless three slices of bread with a ciabatta roll. Extending beyond the bread longways was a long, pink ham steak that flopped out like a panting tongue. Despite the abundance of ham, bacon was added, with cheese melted atop. Along for the ride were lettuce, tomato, onion and mayo, along

with a garden of jalapeños (hence the "hot" moniker). Against the cheese, the fatty, salty meats and mayo, I appreciated the briny zip of the peppers, and eventually they had my cheeks welling up.

The Perfect Reuben (\$10.50) also added bacon, though for the life of me I can't tell why. The only reasons I can come up with are cynical: that people are suckers for bacon being added or that the Big Wave wants to expedite my coronary bypass. Whatever the motive, the addition of bacon to the Reuben is essentially meaningless as it's nearly impossible to detect under a solid inch or more of thickly sliced corned beef. My server and I joked about "perfect" being in the Reuben's name, but in a way it's true. The sandwich is big, a kind of half now, half later portion. The bread was nicely toasted, and melted Swiss cheese on both top and bottom sealed it from getting soggy. Sauerkraut spilled out the sides, and the thousand island provided a leavening sweetness. Indeed, it was probably the best Reuben I've had on the coast.

But it's still a Reuben. Which is really good — just not overly exciting. Same goes for the Big Wave. The skills and the sources are apparent. The only thing missing is surprise.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

Big Wave Cafe

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ☆

822 Laneda Ave., Manzanita

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HOURS: 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily

PRICE: \$\$ — Entrées range from \$10 to \$25

SERVICE: Warm, fun

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Few

DRINKS: Wine, beer, coffee, tea, juice

KEY TO RATINGS

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