

FORT GEORGE BREWERY

Upstairs wood-fired oven sends out flavorful burgers, specials

Every Wednesday, around 3 or 4 p.m., I start checking Twitter. There — and across other social networks — Fort George Brewery announces the Burger Wednesday special. The lovingly staged photograph, often flanked by the wood-fired oven from which it's just emerged, leads to one of two options: changing dinner plans or lamenting an unbreakable engagement.

While hemming mostly close to a traditional bistro burger, the variations over the last two-plus years have run the gamut. Besides pizza, that VW-van-sized, oak-burning, 700-degree furnace has cranked out everything from elk, salmon, portobello mushroom, black bean burgers and beyond. But mostly, Burger Wednesday is a beef patty with flourishing accouterments like red curry peanut butter sauce, pineapple and ham, pulled pork and, of course, a melange of cheeses and the ever-requisite bacon.

Such it was on my most recent trip, when I was lassoed in by a “Cheddar Stuffed” burger (\$13.95) with bacon, caramelized onions, tomatoes, romaine lettuce and pepperjack cheese. The “stuffed” description had me hoping for a Juicy Lucy, the Minneapolis-based concoction that packs a pocket of molten, liquid cheese inside the beef patty that's unleashed as you bite in.

That wasn't quite the case. The cheese, while wound somewhat through the beef, was fixed, not dripping. Nevertheless, it was marvelous. The Painted Hills beef, from Central Oregon, was well seasoned and cooked to a perfect medium rare, pink in the center. The bacon was salty, sweet and succulent, the garlic aioli creamy, the veggies crisp and well-cut, the cheese plentiful but not overwhelming. Indeed, it was just about the model for a bistro bacon burger. The side, however — a handful of kettle chips — was a lackadaisical summer that made the burger feel lavishly priced.

Each week the accompaniments change too. There have been light, fresh acidic salads, a Waldorf, well-dressed baked potatoes, pastas and macaronis, and even a slider — that's right: a burger alongside a tiny one, something like a father and son. There's wide variance here, and it's not always made clear by the social media announcement.

When I went in for the Jalapeño Bison Burger I was nonplussed by the bland, starchy pasta. But my goodness, the barrel-chested burger was exquisite. As it is wont to be, the bison was lean, juicy, flavorful and, again, well-seasoned. The center was bloody, which I liked. The deep frying of the jalapeño chips took their spice down a tad,

but still my cheeks welled up. I didn't, however, notice much — if any — of the dijon.

Strange as it may sound, the best part of the bison burger may have been the brioche bun. Dusted with Parmesan and also cooked in the wood-fired oven, it may have been the best damn hamburger bun I've ever had. It had a brittle, flaky top crust that gave way to a whisper. Inside it was especially soft, light and fluffy.

Indeed, there's a reason that Fort George's pizza is some of the best on the North Coast. But that 700-degree furnace is good for more than bread (and burgers). As a server told me in January of the newly hired chef: “He's dying to put some big chunks of meat in there.” And though what I had wasn't too big, the flavor was all I could handle.

Like the burgers, the daily, wood-fired specials upstairs are on regular rotation. The first I tried was Pork Belly (\$8.95) with a green tomato marmalade that made me think of apples — an ideal sweet and savory combination. The slab of pork belly was about the size of an iPhone with a war-ready case. With a thin, crisp crust, the rivers of



The Fort George's recent “Cheddar Stuffed” burger for Burger Wednesday was just about the model for a bistro bacon burger. The side of kettle chips, however, wanted.

The Jalapeño Bison Burger was exquisite with juicy bison, deep-fried jalapeño chips and cheese. The accompanying pasta was starchy and bland.

fat and flesh inside rendered me into a puddle. If there's a richer, more divine flavor for under \$10 on the North Coast I have yet to find it. Indeed, the pork belly was a lovely special. And as quickly as it appeared it was gone.

To that end, I was sad I couldn't attend the evening they offered the bone-in beef short ribs braised with the Fort's own Cavatica Stout. This one was certainly a big chunk of meat. But I did make it for the Baked Oysters (\$11) which were cooked in the shell and topped with roasted leeks, ricotta cheese and a Pernod spinach pesto. (Pernod, by the way, is an anise-flavored spirit akin to absinthe.) Creamy but still with a hint of brine, the four Netarts oysters were akin to the pork belly in that their structural integrity was all but obliterated by the wood-fired



oven. They melted away, no chewing required. They were also small, and when it comes to oysters, that's a good thing. (As they mature and get bigger, oysters — which depend on filtration for nutrients — soak up more toxins.)

I would be derelict not to mention the beer. In January, I had a special IPA that had fir tips, and it reflected that spritely, springy pop. In February it was Stout Month, a favorite of the George's brewers. I asked my server which was the most wild and adventurous. As the Murky Pearl, which is run through oysters, was only available in the tap-house, he recommended the Tuesday's Lunch, but also brought me two tasters. One taster, the Down and Dirty, featured coffee and almond milk. The North VIII was simply a full-throated, molasses-heavy stout that, frankly, I had trouble telling the difference between. Tuesday's Lunch, however, was unmistakable. Modeled after a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, Tuesday's Lunch truly resembled one. It was uncanny. And, with a relatively mild-bite, it was deceptively strong at 9.3 percent ABV.

Indeed, as much the adjacent brewery has been a laboratory, so too is Fort George's creativity flourishing in the kitchen — particularly upstairs, in that wood-fired oven.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

Fort George Brewery Burger Wednesday & Upstairs Specials

Rating: ★★★★★

1483 Duane St., Astoria

fortgeorgebrewery.com

503-325-7468

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. Burger Wednesday begins at 4:30 p.m. until supplies run out (and they do).

PRICE: \$\$ – Bistro-style burgers priced accordingly.

SERVICE: Cheerful, fun-loving, local color.

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Occasional.

DRINKS: Beer, wine, craft soda, juice, coffee and tea.

KEY TO RATINGS

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