

PIZZA GARDEN

Nehalem home-cooked pizza is made with heart

Rarely do I link pizza with home cooking. But Nehalem's Pizza Garden weds the two like cheese and pepperoni.

"I don't claim to be a chef," writes owner Jeanne Wells, introducing the menu. "I learned to cook as a child, standing on a chair next to my mother. I make most things from scratch."

In a converted house, Pizza Garden is cozier and more inviting than it appears from the street. The interior walls are bold, green and fuchsia, adorned with easy art, plants and the like. There are semi-private nooks, space for medium-sized parties, and a four-seat, tile bar. The south-facing rear of the restaurant is almost like a sun room, full of natural light and placid views of the winding Nehalem River. Outside there's a large deck that must be marvelous on summer evenings.

Alongside a few appetizers, salads, hoagies and pastas there were two specials on this day, and my companion and I ordered them both: a Reuben pizza (\$19 medium) and the "Crobster" (\$12 small), a seafood lasagna.

We began with a Caesar Salad (\$5.50 small, \$7.50 large), and said yes to the inclusion of anchovies. There weren't loads of them, but the bites fish offered little bursts of oil and salt to a peppery, acidic standard that hit the necessary marks.

The Crobster, a lasagna that crossed pesto and Alfredo sauces and added lobster, was a reasonably-sized "small." The dominant flavor of the dish was ricotta, and it produced little more than a bland shrug. The sauces were thin, both in viscosity and flavor, and the choice of lobster — what with the abundance of other regionally available seafood — was puzzling.

The day's other special, however, the Reuben pizza, was absolutely stunning.

Now, appropriating the seminal Jewish deli sandwich might sound strange at first. Sauerkraut on a pizza? But please, hear me out: It's incredible. The sweet thousand island, the salty, briny corned beef, the melty cheese, the bitter caraway seeds (mimicking the rye bread) and the acidic kraut — it's all there, deep and balanced. It pins the essence of a Reuben right on the nose, while being less bread-y, and as the adored delivery vehicle that is a slice of pie. It's practically better than the inspiration. And unlike the sandwich,

Reuben pizza never gets soggy.

On return trips to Pizza Garden I couldn't stop thinking about it. I wanted more of that rich, bitter, sweet, salty, melty perfection. But, alas, there was more to try. In the meantime I hope it's added to the permanent menu.

Now, before going any further, we need to talk about the crust — because, really, a pizza is only as good as its crust. Pizza Garden does an admirable job: a crisp bottom, flaky outer edge, and supple interior. It comes in three variations: regular, thin, and gluten-free. There isn't a world of difference between the regular and thin — the "thin" could be thinner.

It's also worth mentioning that the pizzas are well-sized and a fine value. The medium (14 inches, with eight slices) would easily feed two, maybe three adults. While numerous pies on the



This medium pizza from Nehalem's Pizza Garden is split: the top is Thai, and the bottom is Supreme.

North Coast see prices ballooning beyond the \$30 Rubicon line, Pizza Garden's large, premium pies top out at \$24. They're also available for delivery in Manzanita, Wheeler and Nehalem for a \$3 fee. And if that's where you are, then that's where you should order from — they're the best in the area. Now, back to the pies.

The Supreme (\$19 medium) — with pepperoni, onion, red and green bell peppers, mushrooms and olives was plentiful and traditional. The marinara base was not overly sweet, with an herby fleck, covered with a thick cheese blend.

The Greek (\$19 medium), sported sundried tomatoes, red pepper, onion, kalamata olives, artichoke hearts, pepperoncinis, mozzarella, feta and lamb. Oddly, our server offered almost a warning that the lamb was ground, making sure we were

ready for it. Absolutely loving lamb I welcomed it, only to be let down by the lack of meat. There was about half as much as there should've been. When bites included lamb, its richness leavened the sharp Mediterranean flavors. Without it, the Greek made me pucker.

After the Supreme, I was confident that Pizza Garden had a firm grasp on the standards, so I went out searching with the Thai. Like the Reuben it recontextualizes pizza, but it wasn't as successful. The peanut sauce — along with actual peanuts — offered hints of ginger, but was over-run by the cheese. So too were the shrimp which, again, there wasn't enough of. In hindsight, chicken probably would've been the better choice.

Besides all the dairy, meats and gluten, Pizza Garden is a robust option for those with dietary restrictions. The gluten-free crust (add \$1) is thin and crispy, and the vegan cheese is yeasty and creamy. I had them together with the Kronos Vegan (\$18 medium). With a garlic, herb and olive oil base, spinach, tomato, red onion, roasted garlic, artichoke hearts and almonds, the vegan and gluten-free variations were anything but compromises — they were equals, flavors wholly enjoyable in their own right.

For dessert, Pizza Garden offers an array of ice creams and sorbets, cobblers, cakes and the like. I quite enjoyed the \$3 taster, two-scoops served in ramekins. The butterscotch was rich and especially creamy, an ideal counterpoint on the fresh, ice-y, marionberry sorbet. The frozen deserts felt particularly like something grandma might make.

Indeed, anything — even pizza — can be considered "home cooked." It's short hand for food that's prepared simply, humbly, generously and with heart. And that's how you'll find it at Pizza Garden.

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

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

Pizza Garden

Rating: ★★★★★

35815 N. Hwy 101, Nehalem
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HOURS: 2 to 9 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday; noon to 9 p.m. Friday to Sunday.

PRICE: \$ — a medium pizza will feed two adults

SERVICE: Warm, chatty, easy. Delivery, pick-up, dine-in.

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Plentiful. Pizza Garden is especially thoughtful in catering to those with dietary restrictions, including gluten-free.

DRINKS: Beer, wine, soda, coffee

KEY TO RATINGS

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