

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Astoria restaurant puts the cart before the horse

Review and photos by MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

In the two years leading up to Life in the Slow Lane's March opening, ownership had plenty of time to think.

They began with a concept: The restaurant would celebrate early 20th century Americana — flapper dresses, newsboy caps and, above all, burgeoning automobile culture. The centerpiece, a red 1930 Ford Model A Deluxe Roadster, was labored over, meticulously restored. It is described on their website as the “car that started it all.” The Roadster is parked plum in the middle of prime, brand new real estate: the dining room of an expansive, 4,700-square-foot, two-story building on 16th Street and Marine Drive.

Tables ring the second floor dining room, with views of Marine Drive and the Columbia River. The walls are dotted with other era-evoking ephemera, like vintage boots, hand bags and so on, though the outsized space still feels a bit empty. Staff are dressed accordingly, sporting bold era attire that's oddly aristocratic for the carnival fare. Otherwise quiet, a TV shows black and white cartoons, Betty Boop and the like. The shrill, warbling voices, plinking pianos and crashing sound effects are surreal and, for dining, somewhat uneasy.

Nonetheless, these aesthetic choices would be acceptable, charming even, except that they seem to underscore Life in the Slow Lane's putting the cart before the horse: The food just doesn't hold up. On offer are hot dogs and a fried potato — two classics that are needlessly upended.

We'll begin with the dogs. Rather than served in traditional buns, Slow Lane's “River Dogs” come in hollowed out, lightly toasted Italian rolls. Condiments are squirted inside, then the dog slides in, the tip sticking out like a head from a sleeping bag. At first glance the approach seems novel.

And with the Italian Dog, an herby Italian sausage with marinara sauce and mozzarella cheese, it almost works. (It got soggy quick.) With every other dog, the bread pocket falls totally flat.

The hollowed tube, which leaves just enough space for the dog, doesn't have near enough room for condiments. Hot dog staples — like onions and sauerkraut — are served on the side. Forget anything teeming or Chicago-style. Heck, forget even a modicum of toppings. You get sauce, and that's about it.

Slow Lane's Chili and Cheese Dog is the most egregious offender. A proper chili dog should be absolutely smothered, beans and meat in equal portion to the dog, if not overwhelming it and the bun. It should be a big, glorious, gluttonous, meaty, stewy mess. At Slow Lane, it's as if the dog was merely dipped in the chili and cheese then slid into the roll. In terms of flavor it is, in all honesty, reminiscent of the 7-Eleven, gas station variety: the rubbery nacho-cheese and watery chili thin enough as to be dispensed from a pump. There was nary a bean in sight (nor onions, for that matter, though I could've gotten some on the side...). Believe it or not, the 7-Eleven variation is actually superior to Slow Lane's in that at least there is no limitation to the condiments that can be piled on. It's also about half the price. (River Dogs are \$5.95, save for the \$4.95 Classic Dog.)

That premium price isn't affording a premium dog. They're thick but bland. Established brands like Nathan's Famous and Hebrew



Above: Nary a bean is in sight with Slow Lane's Chili and Cheese Dog, which is served with a thin chili and nacho-cheese-like sauce.



Left: The Column Fry is a spiral-cut potato on a long skewer.

National put a licking on whatever is being used here. (The unseasoned, orange, pressed paste that was the vegetarian dog, meanwhile, was an affront to both hot dogs and vegetarian alternatives.)

Condiments couldn't save the day. The Polynesian Dog, with a marble-sized dollop of pineapple on the tip, featured a sweet and sour sauce that smacked of corn syrup. The veggie dog, which I ordered with “everything” came with mustard and a plastic cup of sauerkraut on the side. (Save for a ketchup pump, Slow Lane has no condiment bar.)

The Column Fry (\$3.95) struggled too. A spiral-cut potato on a long skewer, it split the difference between French fry and chip. Seasoned with a salty dust of your

choice, from “Cheezy Ranch” to “Buffalo Wings,” the texture was off: soft yet dry, lacking a satisfying crunch or hearty center. Despite being served on a stick, the Column Fry necessitated two hands. It wasn't much fun to eat.

It was another decision that had me wondering: Why? In the case of the dog, serving it in a roll rather than a bun, I asked. The answer: Ownership thought the roll would make the dogs cleaner, more portable. But since when was the hot dog ever hard to eat on the go?

At least with the gelato and sorbet, Slow Lane has left well-enough alone. With ingredient mixes from Italy whipped together in-house, I found a wide range. The ones including actual ingredients — like the Oregon Berry (\$3.95 / small), with blackberries and raspberries, and the Strawberry Guava, with strawberry — were far superior to the absolutely artificial ones, like Apple. All a bit fluffy, the chocolate was passable,

LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE

Rating: ★★

1619 Marine Drive, Astoria

818-822-6539

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.
Monday through Sunday.

PRICE: \$ – Before drink, a hot dog and fry will run \$10.

SERVICE: Warm, friendly, earnest

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Not recommended.

DRINKS: Fountain soda, Italian soda, coffee and tea

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

★ Poor

★★ Below average

★★★ Good & worth return

★★★★ Excellent

★★★★★ Best in region

and the salted caramel was buttery.

But in the case of iced dessert (and fried potatoes), there's no reason not to head a few steps down the hill to the marvelous Frite & Scoop, where everything is truly homemade and contains no artificial flavor. The same goes for Custard King, which delivers drive-thru nostalgia and quality burgers with a modern flourish.

It's tough, because the hearts at Life in the Slow Lane are in the right place. There is an earnest goodwill and obvious desire to please. The food, however, has been but an afterthought. Developing flavors didn't receive the same energy and effort as did the restoration of that classic car. The work that was spent on food ended up producing solutions to problems that didn't exist. It's not too late to change. But after some two years in the making, Life in the Slow Lane is only half-baked.