

# Astoria Co-op's spring Farm to Fork dinner an abundant success

Review and photos by  
MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Between courses, a question was posed to the lively dining room: How far does the average food item travel?

The correct answer: 1,500 miles. A prize was forthcoming, a locally made apron bearing the logo of the evening's host: Astoria Co-op Grocery.

Held June 2 at the Columbia Memorial Hospital Community Center's Coho Room, it was the Co-op's sixth (or seventh) Farm to Fork dinner. Its aim: to celebrate the healthy cooking of local foods. For an exceptionally reasonable \$40 some 70-odd diners were treated to four courses and wine, as well as introductions to the farmers and producers. After food costs, proceeds benefited the North Coast Food Web's Project Fruit Box, which delivers organic fruit to local schools.

In an open, instructional kitchen almost like a stage, the meal was prepared by chef Marco Davis along with a small army of helpers. A caterer and cultural taste-maker, Davis is renown for the time he spent helming the Columbian Cafe. Front of house duties were capably handled by Co-op staff and volunteers. Plates were quickly cleared, wine and water glasses kept full.

The evening's menu was assembled the day of, almost wholly from these regional producers: Glory B Farms (Grays River, Washington), 46 North Farm (Olney, Oregon), Strange Family Farm (Naselle, Washington) and Bornstein Seafoods (Astoria).

The first course featured hearty spears of carrot and leek from Glory B, cooked lightly in oil, with a brilliant raw milk white cheddar cheese from Strange Family. It may sound like an oxymoron, since cheese is made by aging, but this white cheddar had a lively, fresh essence, its sharpness like a beam of bright light. While I cleaned the plate, including the tough, chewy leeks, I scoured for every last crumble of that delicious cheese.



The salad featured sticks of asparagus crossed over a bed of spicy arugula, finished with a single slice of caramelized peach and dusted with tiny, edible pink flowers.

The salad course came mostly from Glory B. Sticks of buttery asparagus crossed over a bed of untamed arugula, finished with a single slice of caramelized peach, dribbled with a few drops of vinegar, and dusted with tiny, edible pink flowers. Said chef Marco: "I like to decorate food with food." I would've welcomed a few more slices of peach as a sweetening balance to the arugula's striking wallop.

"Woooo, that's a spicy arugula!" said the emcee, eliciting cheers and laughs from the crowd. "Not everybody likes it, and that's OK," he added. "But that arugula is so good for you we could have a whole talk about it."

The discussion instead turned to the soil that birthed it. "Quality of food is directly relatable to nutrients in soil," said Glory B's Tom Zimmerman, noting his was particularly high in calcium. Using kale as an

example, Zimmerman said it would grow without that calcium but fall well short of potential. But combine that nutrient-rich soil with the North Coast's moist climate, Zimmerman said, and that kale "will grow as well as it's able to."

Andrew Bornstein, a third-generation co-owner of Bornstein Seafoods, took the microphone to introduce the main course, describing petrale sole as the outstanding fish of the West Coast that's overlooked by outsiders. Bornstein spoke too of the fishing industry's history in Astoria. Of the petrale sole on our plates, Bornstein recognized the boats that brought them in. "These fish are caught either by the Cassandra Anne or the Ocean View," he said, "caught by a fishing family in Knappa."

The sole was draped over a pillow of supple rice, atop a bed of Glory B's crisped rainbow chard,

topped with capers and a long, snaking garlic scape. Large radishes impersonated red potatoes. The whitefish, prepared with lemon, was almost impossibly soft, its molecular structure only just barely maintaining the properties of a solid.

"I didn't salt or pepper anything tonight," said chef Marco. "I let it all sing for itself." Indeed, the flavors here were not coaxed, constructed or complex — they were elemental, raw and earthy.

Dessert was a gluten-free strawberry shortcake with whole whipped cream from Strange Family and rhubarb from 46 North. Noting that it grows incredibly well here, farmer Teresa Retzlaff said she harvested the rhubarb that morning. The gluten-free cake more resembled a biscuit. It was buttery and over-salted, but flaky and texturally successful. The whipped cream was marvelous, as if lighter than air.



The main course featured local-caught petrale sole draped over rice, a bed of crisped rainbow chard, topped with capers, a garlic scape and radishes.



Dessert was a gluten-free strawberry-rhubarb shortcake with whole whipped cream and edible flowers.

Dessert, like the previous courses, was appropriate for this, the spring edition of the Farm to Fork dinner. Indeed, the meal reflected the region at this time of year. It was light, lean, green, simple and burgeoning. (To that end, I expect September's coming iteration of the Farm to Fork series to reflect fall's coming accordingly.) While the room was a bit loud at times, I found it full of good company: tables shared by adventurous, food-forward folks and farmers alike. Everyone had something to share.

It was the ideal co-op meal in two ways: First, it was profoundly healthy; second, it came from sustainable, local producers. Indeed, while the average food stuff may come from hundreds and thousands of miles away, this one came from our own abundant backyard.