

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Pamper your palate with a fresh choice

Review and photos by
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I was beat. My feet hurt. My brain was fried. I'd been working too much and I needed a break. I needed to be treated, taken care of. To unwind. So I got in the car and I drove south, over the cliffs of Neahkahnie Mountain to Wheeler where I found the Rising Star Cafe.

I knew of the Rising Star, of its fine reputation, that the hole-in-the-wall, funky building and its peeling blue paint was not representative of the fine food inside. I did not know, however, that reservations are almost wholly required. When I arrived on a Wednesday evening around 6:45 p.m. I was nearly turned away despite the restaurant being half-full. A little persistence got me a table. My luck continued as I was carrying cash. I rarely do, and Rising Star doesn't take cards. (Checks are OK.)

The dining room is tiny — roughly the size of an apartment bedroom. Space-saving wooden benches run lengthwise. The room is casually dressed, with natural light and pastel style evocative of a breakfast nook. There's space enough for maybe 10 or 12 diners to fit comfortably. On this evening they're mostly couples, sitting closely. Sounds and smells drift in from the adjacent kitchen, over big band jazz on the stereo.

The menu bears the day's date. It is short and in constant flux; there are but a handful of main course options, no appetizers nor side dishes. Each selection comes with a salad. Besides a pasta or two, a cioppino and a \$20 burger, they are as such: an animal protein with a medley of vegetables. Despite there being only 10 or so options, it's quite difficult to decide. Everything looks amazing. Top quality ingredients and classic techniques.

Seafood, the servers say, is chef Ron's specialty. It comes from Garibaldi. (The produce, from Tillamook, and the beef from Colorado, from a farm where the chef apparently once worked.) With that



The Oregon Red Rockfish & Shrimp Francaise featured potatoes, a medley of vegetables, rockfish, shrimp, and citrus beurre blanc.



Above: Bolognese fettuccine is just once of many choices on Thursdays — pasta night — at Rising Star Cafe in Wheeler.

Left: The Key Lime Tart was topped with a tower of fresh whipped cream.

suggestion I bypassed the Canary Island Roasted Lamb Stew (which would be gone from the menu the next week) in favor of the Oregon Red Rockfish & Shrimp Francaise (\$29), which the menu described as an "Italian interpretation of a French concept using Northwest ingredients."

First came the salad, on a clear glass plate. Dusted with Parmesan and tossed ever so slightly in a vinaigrette, the lightly spicy greens and carrot spears stood firmly on their own, fresh as could be, telling of the soil. The portion was slight, meant to peacefully rouse digestion, to warm up.

Carefully arranged, dotted with flower petals and curly-cued scallions, the main course was both abundant and labored over. Stacked like a mountain upon boulders of exquisitely seasoned, perfectly crusted, soft home-fried potatoes and

surrounded with a smorgasbord of veggies — from green beans, tomatoes, mushrooms, bell pepper, carrot, zucchini, kale and more — were two large cuts of rockfish, bay shrimp and citrus beurre blanc. The fish's breading was light, not crisp, and used seemingly to hold it together. All together, under so much of the beurre blanc, the meal was rather acidic. The fish was buttery enough to meet, withstand and balance it. The shrimp, not so much. I couldn't finish — it was a good feeling, that a dainty presentation didn't preclude a wallop of food.

As one diner mentioned to his companion after finishing a similar plate: "I'm stuffed with the best stuff," he exhaled. "To be full when it's so healthy, that's where to be."

Unlike him I saved room for dessert, an exquisite Key Lime Tart (\$6) topped with a leaning tower of fresh whipped cream, sprinkled with dried blueberries over a graham cracker crust. Against its cooling, smooth brightness I enjoyed a warming perk from the vast menu of green teas. I was tempted, as many were, to poke my head into the kitchen, or to send word via the server, to thank

the chef. Indeed, the experience had relaxed me, made me recognize the fruits of my labor.

I returned a few weeks later and found a similar menu, albeit with a few changes here and there. I was curious about the burger — could it justify the \$20 price tag? But I was taken in by Pork Tenderloin Casalunga (\$26), its divine crust more than a textural addition, its herbs tantalizing and mysterious. It was tremendously Italian. Save for creamy, whipped mashed potatoes replacing the home fries of the Rockfish and nearly a head of roasted garlic, the accompaniments were quite similar. I dreamed about sides that were more reactive, conversational with the main courses. The homogenization is another of Rising Star's idiosyncrasies. It is a restaurant that is both casual and particular.

This all changes on Thursdays — pasta nights. There, without reservations, one can get a quick plate for a relatively low price (\$12.50). Pick your noodle — linguini, penne or fettuccine — and your sauce, in this case pesto, pomarola, bolognese or lamb stroganoff. I tried the bolognese and lamb and was comforted

RISING STAR CAFE

Rating: ★★☆☆

92 Rorvik St., Wheeler

503-368-3990

HOURS: 5 to 8 p.m. Wednesday to Saturday, and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday.

PRICE: \$\$\$ — With drinks, couples will spend \$100 (cash/check only)

SERVICE: Particular — reservations required — but a cut above the rest

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Few choices, but high quality

DRINKS: Cocktails, wine, beer, tea

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Below average
- ★★★ Good
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★★ Best in region

and satiated by both. Each invoked excellent home cooking. The bolognese was straightforward, elemental, simplified. The stroganoff, with gobs of sour cream, featured big chunks of succulent lamb. It was almost like a different restaurant.

It's the other nights of Rising Star's short week that speak to the restaurant's heart, though — that casual, particular heart. Give yourself over to chef Ron and his exacting specifications and you can indeed leave feeling a little more pampered and personally cared for than most restaurants in the area. Indeed, with the Rising Star's quaint size, it's apparent chef Ron puts himself into every single dish.

One group, after dinner, dessert and wine, were lingering. Part-time residents from Manzanita, they were discussing the seminal New Yorker piece about a tsunami landing on the North Coast. They did so with blasé cheer — as if it wouldn't matter at all if everything were washed away. Indeed, a good meal can do that for you.