

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Island-inspired eatery delivers new flavors to Seaside

Review and photos by
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Let the parade of new restaurants continue!

This week it's the Lilikoi Grill, a Hawaiian-inspired joint in downtown Seaside. It's in the middle of a block of Broadway that might as well be known as McKeown's Ave — the family owns four eateries on the block, including the neighboring Irish Pub, Firehouse Grill and Nonni's Italian Bistro.

The Lilikoi, which opened in May, inhabits the back-half of what used to be McKeown's. The family's former namesake restaurant was paired down, and by simple virtue of offering a different culinary inspiration — colorful, fruity and loosely island-based — the Lilikoi is a welcome change. It's smaller than the former flagship with high ceilings and a beach-y, if a tad cheesy, island decor. There's thatch, seashells and green leaves in a building whose seeming original inspiration was the French Quarter. In design, Lilikoi doesn't go full tiki, but the bar does offer a smattering of cocktails featuring fruity nectars.

I began with the Rum Punch, a pre-mixed, syrupy sweetener with an umbrella skewering a cherry and slice of pineapple. With hints of orange, banana and pineapple, I found it a fine value for only \$5.

The Crispy Coconut Shrimp with Papaya Mango Chutney (\$13) arrived shortly thereafter — four of them, breaded with fried coconut, butterflied and enormous, sprinkled with green onions and a few more flecks of raw coconut. These were serious-sized crustaceans, but there was quite a bit of breading too. The fried coconut tempura batter had a nice crunch and wasn't too oily, but I could've done with less. And without the butterflying. The accompanying mango chutney was overly sweet, smacking of corn syrup or simple sugar. I wanted more pep. But still: The shrimp and their coconut crust hit the requisite marks.

The entrée, though, went beyond. It was, in the end, the star of my multiple trips to Lilikoi. I speak, of course, of the Braised Glazed Pork Shank (\$17).

It came standing up, planted in a pile of whipped red potatoes, bones in, with a little crown of micro greens. It was massive, the diameter of a softball, full of meat, well-cleaned and covered in a lightly sweet veal demi-glacé. The flesh pulled easily from the bone, hardly resisting, no knife required. It was salty, tender, succulent and multi-faceted. The outer-layer had a crispy char while the center was oh-so soft — braised, then seared. The whipped red potatoes, with skin, were light and fluffy, buttery and dotted with cloves of roasted garlic. The Brussels sprouts too were well-roasted.

Sopping up the demi-glacé, both melded with the meat. Which, again, there was so much of. I peeled away the front half and was satiated, but kept going back. One more bite. Another. One more. As I finally put the fork down, the shank was still standing, still with a reasonable amount of meat on the bone. I sipped at the Rum Punch, whose fruity sweetness roller-coasted against the salty, fatty, buttery main course. There, in one of the thatch-covered booths, I marinated, fully content — on both the flavor and presentation of that delicious, still-standing pork shank, and that it didn't cost an arm and a leg.

My second trip failed and didn't engender that same sense of peace and serenity.

It was a Saturday night, and while the Lilikoi wasn't at capacity, it was close. I took a seat at the bar and wasn't acknowledged again for the next 10 minutes. As I sat beside a pair of couples celebrating birthdays and buzzed on fruity drinks, I felt like the staff was short a server. The bartender, who would regularly



Above: The Braised Glazed Pork Shank, bone-in, came sanded up with a crown of micro greens accompanied by whipped red potatoes and roasted Brussels sprouts.

Left: The Salmon with White Bean Chorizo and Langostino Ragu was an OK entree, but the ragu's lack of synergy fell flat.

be called on to make complicated, multi-ingredient, shaken cocktails, also had to serve and buss numerous tables, some on the other side of the restaurant. While efficient and capable, a few concurrent drink orders could — and did — short circuit the whole thing.

As such, my Lilikoi Margarita (\$8) was made by a server instead of the overburdened bartender, and it suffered dramatically. What I got was over-salted to the point of being undrinkable. It was like a salt-lick — and not just on the rim, but in the glass. I couldn't finish. I ordered Clams "to start with," and even drew out the selection of my entrée. But by the time I'd eaten about four clams my main course — Salmon with White Bean Chorizo and Langostino Ragu (\$21) — had arrived. The server made note of the pile up but didn't offer to keep it warm.

I tried sticking with the heaping serving of clams, which weren't too gummy, and the buttery, white-wine, garlic and coconut-tinged sauce. But I couldn't help thinking that my entrée was just getting cold, so I dove in. The fish's outside was buttery and just the lightest bit crusted, which I liked, but the center was less inspired. Good and well-cooked salmon should be irresistible, like a buttery, lean-fat, hi-octane gold. This wasn't quite that. It was either a tad over-cooked, of not the highest quality, or somewhere in the middle. The white bean melange, with carrots and onions, while hearty, was very much the sum of its parts. Needing more spice, the chorizo remarked: "bacon." A few shrimp were tossed in too, but from the bowl a greater synergy never arose.

I probably enjoyed the clams more and dunking the crusty, white, bleached garlic bread into the buttery sauce. I took another sip of my salt-

LILIKOI GRILL

Rating: ★ ★ ★

714 Broadway, Seaside

lilikoigrill.com

503-738-5232

HOURS: 3 to 9 p.m. Thursday through Monday.

PRICE: \$\$ – Entrees mostly in the teens

SERVICE: Over-stretched on a busy weekend

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: A few odds and ends for vegetarians

DRINKS: Full bar, soda, coffee

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

★ Poor

★★ Below average

★★★ Good

★★★★ Excellent

★★★★★ Best in region

a-rita, and set the half-full cup back down and wondered: Was Lilikoi a high-variance restaurant? Or I had I ordered the best thing on the menu my first trip?

I returned a few days later during Happy Hour. I found a few good deals and couldn't help it if they were less island-y. (Lilikoi does fish and chips, after all.) The Kobe Burger (\$6.50) is, well, extra beefy — hand-pressed and seasoned, a whopping half-pound of it. Calling the bun "brioche," however, was a stretch. With it I had a "baby" Caesar salad (\$4) that was robustly adult-sized. And, with the bartender securely at the helm, I gave the Lilikoi Margarita (\$1 off, 3 to 6 p.m.) another shot. This time it was on point, tart and stiff.

I left feeling... fine. Not marinating in the afterglow like that first trip, nor questioning as I had the second. I felt simply: that Lilikoi is an improvement to McKeown's Ave. And that you should try the pork shank.