

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Refined flavors, easygoing attitude makes The Depot a must

Review and photos by
MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA
MOUTH@COASTWEEKEND.COM

I couldn't do it anymore. When asked about the best restaurants around, I couldn't say I'd never been to The Depot. I couldn't keep blathering: "It's won a lot of awards, and I've heard really great things."

I had to know.

So on a Wednesday I stopped in. I didn't have a reservation (recommended), but the staff offered a seat at the bar — or out back on the heated, trellised, ivy-covered patio. I stayed inside not only to get a better sense of the place, but because I was already becoming immersed.

The room, with high ceilings, wine-red walls, and plenty of soft lamps and European-inspired decor seemed to whisper: "Relax, exhale, settle in, it's all good." The calm extended to the kitchen, which is visible through a large cutout at the rear of the restaurant. The two-top below is called the "Chef's Table." The pace, while determined, was equally de-stressed.

Quickly I was impressed by the service, an apparent mix of veterans and poised newbies. One of the youngsters, seemingly fresh out of high school, recited the laundry list of specials from memory in full. Still, deciding what to order was difficult, an embarrassment of tantalizing possibilities. There was hardly an un-interesting, un-inspired dish in the bunch. Indeed, if there was ever any fat to begin with, it's since been trimmed from The Depot's menu. As co-owner and front-of-house impresario Nancy Gorshe said of the Calamari: "We're famous for it. We can't take it off the menu."

Indeed, after opening in Seaview, Washington, The Depot has been distilling its successes in the 13 years since. Owners Gorshe and chef Michael Lalewicz appear as personally invested in both food and experience as ever. On one visit, after the dinner rush



The Cantonese Duck featured medallions of succulent duck breast topped with a blackberry hoisin glaze.

died down, as Lalewicz surveyed the dining room from the kitchen's open window, a peaceful, contented grin curled up his cheeks. At the same time, Gorshe chatted with regular customers. It was no mere small talk; with multiple groups Gorshe shared genuine details, true concern, hugs and laughter. Hers is an effortless joy.

I began with the Baja Salad (\$7). I was perked not only by the salad's robust brightness but its depth. In what would become a thread running through just about everything I tasted, the dish was more than the sum of its parts. The synthesis was exponential. The avocado-lime vinaigrette was both creamy and citrusy; the kale hearty, supple and crisp; the crumbles of cotija mild; the butter beans kissed with oregano.

The synergy of the main course, the Cantonese Duck (\$25), was positively astounding. The medallions of succulent duck breast, pan seared, with lightly crisp skin and a luscious layer of fat, were topped with a blackberry hoisin glaze that married sweet, savory, salt, acid, bitterness, a touch of smoked paprika and then some. It was a marvelous complexity — the kind that takes not only a wealth of excellence and experience to execute but to merely dream up. As the servers checked in on me I found myself repeating a single word: "exquisite."

Finishing up, I noticed a familiar face down the bar, an acquaintance I hadn't seen in years. I said



The Pan Seared Salmon, blackened but still moist, was served with a porcini mushroom cream sauce, veggies, smashed potatoes and corn on the cob.

hello. Instead of a full meal, she'd come for a glass of wine and some small plate snacks. Indeed, The Depot is just as good for nibbling as it is for multiple courses. The Peruvian Mango Sea Scallops (\$13) were plated like modern art, three of them ringed by vibrant pools of silky, smooth yellow mango and an outer ring of jalapeño. The jalapeño sauce — almost like a jelly — wasn't spicy, but the long, thin, curled strands of pinkish-purple onions provided a pickled kick.

As much as the food, ingredients and service, the restaurant's long bar cultivated an atmosphere of conviviality. It, as much as any alcoholic drink, was a social lubricant. And, to this end, I can only imagine The Depot acts as one of the more romantic eateries on the North Coast. We finished by sharing dessert — a big gooey Brownie with Salted Caramel a la Mode (\$7.50). "Oh my God," my companion said. "It makes me feel like a kid again." Ecstatically she clapped a quiet round of applause.

My second trip was every bit as marvelous as my first. Under the rush of a Friday night in August, nothing changed. Well, I still agonized over what to eat — or, just

the same, what I wouldn't miss out on. As I did, the larger picture came into focus: The Depot's dishes, assembled using a predominantly traditional European technique, incorporate Asian and Central American flourishes and employ mostly regional ingredients. After circling the world, The Depot lands at home. As one diner said, exiting the restaurant: "It's the most urban spot on the peninsula."

The Thai Calamari (\$13) perfectly encompassed this mode. The wild calamari — from Oregon — were tossed in a thick Thai peanut cilantro sauce that was one, maybe two steps evolved. Not oily or particularly even peanutty, it was green and tasted as such: fresh, pointed and earthy. On a bed of spinach, kale and cabbage, it could be tossed to resemble a salad. Despite the winning sauce, the breading was spectacular — a crunch to die for.

The local "catch of the day" seafood special — Pan Seared Salmon (\$28) — also had crisp edges, blackened but still moist in the center. A velvety smooth, porcini mushroom cream sauce kept the fish from anything like a diet, rather resplendent and rich. Among

THE DEPOT

Rating: ★★★★★

1208 38th Place, Seaview
depotrestaurantdining.com

360-642-7880

HOURS: 5 to 9 p.m. daily.

PRICE: \$\$ – Spendy but never gouging, worth it

SERVICE: Welcoming, expert, attentive and easygoing

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Plentiful, thoughtful, and substitutions available

DRINKS: Wine and beer

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

the simply prepared veggies and robust Yukon gold smashed potatoes was a small section of corn on the cob. With a smile, Gorshe advised that I "pick it up and eat with your hands."

That easygoing sentiment — alongside the synergy, diversity and refinement of flavor — is what takes the Depot over the top. All the excellence and elegance from the kitchen was enveloped by a welcoming, nonjudgemental vibe. The service, meanwhile, remains highly attentive. Indeed, The Depot is simultaneously upscale and unpretentious, refined and inclusive, classy and chill. You'd be hard-pressed to eat better in flip flops. All throughout I felt like I was getting my money's worth, too.

Indeed, from top to bottom, front-of-house to back, there isn't a single weak link in The Depot's chain.

So if you haven't been, well, what are you waiting for?