

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Workingman's watering hole serves up hearty fare

Photos and Review by
MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA
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"These are the tales of the rough and tumble life that is Astoria's history and folklore," concludes the Portway tavern's back-of-menu biography. And indeed, the nearly 100-year-old saloon, just off Pier 1, revels in a grit and grind — where the Wild West collides with the surly barnacles of the docks.

Located just south of the Astoria-Megler Bridge, the Portway was built in 1923 by Victor Jarvinen. Living above, Jarvinen started serving in 1925. In 1931 he turned the business over to Paul, his son, who operated the pub until 1984, and whose spirit remains today.

According to the menu, "Portway Paul" was a "successful professional boxer" who "ran tabs for nearly everybody and would always buy the house a round whenever anyone would pay off his tab." Tall and unsavory tales abound: a trap door in the floor, underage drinking, a fight club and, perhaps, a brothel upstairs. Myth has it that Paul's ghost continues to haunt the joint.

Operating today, presumably, in greater accordance with the law, the Portway retains its odor as a workingman's watering hole. It is dark, heavy, wooden and worn, littered with memorabilia, particularly orange lifebuoys and, at times, crammed full of dock workers wearing XtraTufs. On my first visit there loads of men, all of similar age, dress and physique. A near total absence of women pronounced their likeness. At one point I counted some 22 men and one woman — well, two counting the bartender. She did her best to handle the thirsty onslaught, though the crowd drank collectively faster than she could mix and pour (and serve and buss and cash lotto tickets).

With hardly an empty seat in the joint, it took almost 30 minutes before I got to order. "They got to



Above: The fish and chips were served on a faux newspaper.
Top left: The Deep Fried Cheese Ravioli were akin to mozzarella sticks, but overpriced.
Bottom left: The rather small tuna melt featured chunky sweet pickles and unmelted cheese.

get you some help," I told the perpetually moving bartender. "That's what I keep telling the boss," she said, mid-stride.

The kitchen was far less burdened than the bar. My food appeared in a flash. From the list of mostly deep fried appetizers I went with the Deep Fried Cheese Ravioli (\$7.25). I figured: I'd never had deep-fried ravioli before, and we all know poppers, mozzarella sticks and calamari. As the ravioli appeared my jaw dropped: There were but six modestly sized squares. Essentially mozzarella sticks in different shape, only more dough and less cheese, they amounted to over a dollar per square. I was aghast — a scant, lame ripoff. I wondered if I'd made a mistake: that the Portway was just a place to drink.

The side-salad presaging my burger began to dispel that notion. After the crummy ravioli I expected a bowl of lifeless iceberg lettuce and maybe an out-of-season tomato. I was happily proven wrong with a robust mix of spring greens.

The Bacon Bleu Cheese Burger (\$11) came open faced, the grilled onions, mushrooms and bacon charred, twinkling, sparkling with shiny grease. My arteries quivered, but my god, when I chomped down on the hulking thing I felt like the bypass would be worth it. It was a drippy, salty, gooey, delicious mess. The bacon was thick with crunch, the onions sweetly caramelized, the mushrooms earthy, all with the pang of blue cheese. It was an excellent, hand-formed, old-school bar burger. The Portway's hard-working clientele, I surmised, wouldn't suffer anything less.

Under that hypothesis, I figured that no one ever ordered the Tuna Melt (\$8.25), because it — like the raviolis — was pitifully puny. The whole slice of toasted sourdough was not much bigger than a half sandwich. Worse was the cheese — it wasn't melted at all. It was, rather, sweaty. Though the essence of the sandwich died there, the chunky, sweet pickles were a questionable inclusion.

By this time the crowd had thinned considerably. I'd arrived at 8 p.m., finding the only empty table in the place. By 9 p.m., there were but a few remaining stragglers. When the karaoke jockey finished setting up and started to sing (the Portway offers karaoke Wednesday through Saturday) she hadn't much of an audience, and no takers stepped up to the mic.

I returned on a Friday afternoon around 4 p.m. and was served promptly. I had the Fish & Chips (\$18.75), which were served on a faux newspaper, a corny historical nod I enjoyed. While spendy and not impressively sized — somewhat similar to chicken wings and drumsticks — the four pieces of beer-battered halibut were outstanding. The whitefish — moist, clean and lean — was encased in a crust that was paper thin, salty and golden brown. Tuna Melt notwithstanding, I again guessed — or, rather, hoped — that, even if it weren't sourced daily off the docks, guys who worked in close proximity

THE PORTWAY

Rating: ★ ★ ★

422 W. Marine Drive,
Astoria

portway-astoria.com

503-325-2651

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday and Tuesday; 11 a.m. to 1 a.m. Wednesday and Thursday; 11 a.m. to 1:30 a.m. Friday and Saturday; and noon to 9 p.m. Sunda.

PRICE: \$ – Entrées hover around \$10, up to \$20 for steaks and fish & chips

SERVICE: Appropriately gruff, knowledgeable with regulars, at times slammed

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Where red meat is king, not recommended

DRINKS: Full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

to fish wouldn't tolerate inferior product.

But then, while we're guessing, I figured the Portway was a place where folks were as likely to order red meat as anything. So I tried the Steak Sandwich (\$12.75). The 7-ounce New York strip almost seemed larger, over an inch thick and poking out the ends of the hoagie roll. Though more medium than medium-rare, it was juicy and mostly free of gristle. The grilled mushrooms and onions weren't charred like on the burger, but the onions were still sweetly caramelized. Here was a big, simple, beefy sandwich that worked. It felt right at home. I could imagine Portway Paul chomping down on one — after a fight, a late-night game of cards, or another grueling shift.