

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Restaurant aims high with stylish atmosphere, globe-trotting menu

Review and photos by
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In the year and a half since I became the Mouth, a few handfuls of restaurants have thrown open their doors. None have been as ambitious as Carruthers. Sure, there have been big buildouts (Pelican Pub) and innovative menus (Buttercup). But none have aimed so high simultaneously.

Named for the historic building on 12th and Commercial streets, Carruthers is plunked in the dead center of the ever-revitalizing downtown Astoria. Kitty-corner to the Liberty Theater, the restaurant is a designer's dream (one which, perhaps, reflects the historic theater, whose sign and aura twinkle through the windows). On show nights it'll be the place to see and be seen.

Like a hip hotel lobby with double-high ceilings, art deco — with clean, stark lines, icy, bold colors and ornate flourishes — rules the day. There is marble — real and faux — plus plenty of low-light sources, gargantuan gold-rimmed mirrors, delicate stemware and so on. It's all about mood, and that mood invokes two things: high-society and metropolitan style. That there's a cocktail named the Clark Gable says just about everything you need to know.

OK, there are few more things you need to know: Carruthers, which opened in mid-August, is owned by the same folks as the respected and well-oiled Astoria Coffeehouse & Bistro. But I digress: Clark Gable, Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant.

The sizable though hardly cavernous restaurant is divvied into three spaces — a dining room, including a potential communal table capable of seating parties greater than 10; a gleaming, titanic U-shaped bar with a few adjacent tall tables; and a lounge of burly, black leather couches and chairs clustered around a humming gas fireplace.

While certainly reaching for a fanciful vibe of exclusivity and privilege (and indeed, peering out



Above: The Blackened Scallops married an earthy richness to the ocean's kiss.

Top left: The Creole Gumbo Chowder was a resounding success.

Bottom left: The Moroccan Vegetable Sauté offers flavors that are scarce on the North Coast.

the dining room's large windows can feel like a portal to the class divide), Carruthers avoids feeling overly haughty, thanks mostly to a staff that's down to earth and willing to laugh. That said, service and execution sometimes slip out of whack with the grand vision and high price point.

The menu's aspirations are broader than the tightly realized interior design. There are three classifications for entrées — Ocean, Pasture and Garden — as well as starters, soups and salads. There are flavors from Africa, Europe, America, Mexico and Asia. For a time I fretted about what to order — many things interested me, and I worried how I might get a wide-enough sample. "It's really eclectic," said one server of the menu. "So you have to keep coming back to try everything. And then in December everything changes." The menu will continue to turnover every four months. A little more at ease, I wondered if there could be method to the varietal madness: that, as the North Coast lacks many regional cuisines, Carruthers could fill some of those holes.

But, then again, is an \$18, Moroccan-spiced couscous plate really a hole we need filled?

Piled in a pyramid — plating presentation is tantamount at Carruthers — the Moroccan Vegetable Sauté (\$18) stacked the aforementioned couscous, chickpeas, figs, mustard greens, onions and a thick tomato sauce, all crowned with a poached egg and micro-greens. The Moroccan spices — coriander, turmeric, paprika and so on — both unified the dish and filled one of our region's underrepresented profiles. The egg offered gooey protein, but there wasn't enough. While healthy, lean and nourishing, I felt like I was eating hippie food from a fancy bowl. And had it been real hippie food — served, in my mind, from an imaginary cart — the portion would've been twice as large.

The same bowl — like an upside-down UFO, with a big white rim for negative space — cupped the Blackened Scallops (\$25). The trio sat in the center, surrounded by smoked, white cheddar grits whose pungent cheesiness made me sit up straight. Over were laid a few spears

of asparagus, grilled over a flame, inciting barbecue's char. The large scallops were blackened on the edge and supple. They were topped with pickled chanterelles and a truffle oil black garlic relish, which married an earthy richness to the ocean kiss. With the scallops, Carruthers hit its marks — refined, deep, exquisite and rich.

I too enjoyed the Creole Gumbo Chowder (\$6 cup), which effectively crossed chowder and gumbo. It was creamy, viscous and hearty, sparked with cotija cheese crumbles. When it comes to rewriting the menu, the chowder should remain.

The Carruthers Salad (\$7 half), though, needs work. It was multi-faceted, though almost confusingly so. Bites alternated between sweet and salty, though not in any meaningful — or seemingly intended — conversation. It was like laundry that hadn't been separated. The ingredients, however — like avocado, roasted squash and dried blueberries — seemed plucked from a fine wardrobe.

From my first visit I stared at the menu's Rack of Lamb with a gimlet eye. When I finally got it, though,

CARRUTHERS

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ☆

**1198 Commercial St.,
Astoria**

PHONE: 503-975-5305

HOURS: 4 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; 4 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

PRICE: \$\$\$ – Prices to match exclusive atmosphere

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN

OPTIONS: Vegetarians will do well

SERVICE: Charming, not quite white-gloved

DRINKS: Full bar with fancy cocktails

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

I was let down. While again with a nice, crusty char and tender center, the two chops were hardly above room temperature. Ringed with mint chimichurri, apricot jam, candied citrus fennel and stood up over a pile of cheesy, brown-rice-like sage farro, I found the sweetness unbalanced. The accompaniment could've — and probably should've — provided counterpoint. Without question, though, the lamb should've been hotter. And at \$29, Carruthers' price zenith, you expect and deserve an excellence that the lamb didn't deliver.

Perhaps that's the pitfall of such an involved, globe-trotting menu — there's just so much the kitchen has to pay attention to and get ever-so-right. Indeed, Carruthers set its own bar high. There's no reason to believe that, upon future menu revisions, the restaurant may begin to clear it with finesse. But for now, the landing of its moon shot has been a little bumpy.