

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Fill your craving for Americanized Chinese food at Great Wall

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

The parking lot of Gearhart's Great Wall is often bulging. At the same time, the restaurant can appear rather barren, its brightly lit booths mostly empty. Patrons — mostly locals — pass time in the lounge.

But unlike Seaside's West Lake Chinese Restaurant, where the bar clientele come primarily to socialize, drink and gamble, it's not unheard of to find folks eating at the Great Wall. (I reviewed West Lake back in April.)

Still, there are a host of similarities. Both restaurants offer a very Americanized version of Chinese cuisine — reliant mostly on the deep fryer and wok — and decades-old design inspiration. But the Great Wall exceeds West Lake in almost every regard. It's clean, cozy and well taken care of and, most importantly, imminently more edible.

On my trips to Great Wall, I too was drawn to the cozier and more lively lounge. Without windows, it resembles something like a basement game room. Despite the booths, the teeming bar, the paper lanterns and Chinese ephemera, it felt to me very civilian — the kind of place people gather to watch a football game and speak freely. Some of that is due to the locals and their regular comfort with the place. But some too is owed to the design.

The menu is as nearly all Americanized Chinese restaurants are: needlessly stuffed. Choosing is difficult not because there are so many options, but because they're all so similar. (The usage of relatively incremental Chinese nomenclature doesn't help either.) The overwhelming majority of the menu breaks down into three choices: protein, sauce and veggies. If you'd like, there's a fourth choice: starch. In other words: rice, noodles or pancakes. Indeed, when multiple servers can't tell you what's best or most popular it's a



The Fried Scallop appetizer was a little salty, but good with the accompanying spicy mustard

problem — the menu's.

There are the customary appetizers, most of which are breaded and fried — shrimp, calamari, scallops, crab — as well as pot stickers, egg rolls, egg drop, sweet and sour soup and so on. What there isn't is anything of much authenticity or adventure. You've got your General Tso's, Orange, and Sweet and Sour chicken, but little — if any — regional specialties that people in China actually eat.

I began with the Fried Scallop appetizer. As the menu is presented in the singular — it reads "scallop" — and because scallops are expensive, I asked the server if it was just one single, exquisite piece. She suggested it was. When the Fried Scallop (\$10) arrived — at the same time as my main course, unfortunately — there were many, some eight roundish little puff balls. Atop a useless bed of cabbage they were encrusted in a light batter and dusted with a hailstorm of salt. As the excess couldn't be shook or dabbed off I began ripping off the sparkling tops and enjoying little crunchy, fleshy pods. While they weren't the most exquisite, fresh bursts of ocean, they were worth eating — especially after a dunk in the sinus-clearing spicy mustard.

The Ma La Shrimp (\$16.95) presented a simple preparation that makes up a significant cross-section of Great Wall's menu — the shrimp were lightly cooked, tossed along with veggies in a simple, oily sauce (in this case, garlic), and served with a side of white rice. The mix of



The No. 5 combination features broccoli beef, pork fried rice, sweet and sour pork, and an egg roll.

veggies included a few slices of bell pepper, onion, the errant machined carrot, cabbage and loads of bamboo shoots. Of the veggie mix, most were crisp and watery — more texture than taste. Again, totally fine, though rather spendy, all told.

The veggies didn't quite live up to the menu's billing: "Known for our fresh ingredients." They surely seemed more likely frozen. (While I cannot attest to Great Wall's history, I spoke with a friend who's been eating there for many years. Without prompting she said the quality of vegetables has declined in recent years.)

The same mix — cabbage, onion, carrots and all those bamboo shoots — accompanied the Curry Chicken (\$13). I felt a keen sense of déjà vu, only the shrimp had been swapped for chicken and the garlic sauce for curry. Or, rather, curry-lite. Otherwise, the sauces had similar viscosity and passivity — the flavor was mild, more a suggestion than assertion. While it didn't make my tastebuds do the cha-cha, I was heartened that the dish was at least rather healthy. (That said, I didn't bother with the white rice, and I wished Great Wall offered brown.)

I also tried the Sweet and Sour

Soup (\$3.95, small), which was on the savory side. It more resembled a beefy, peppery, celery gravy that I can't imagine why anyone would want to spoon up. The Egg Drop was at least warm, slurpy and stoked at least some sense of familiarity.

On another trip I had one of the combinations. There are eight on the menu plus a section where you can make your own. Mine, the No. 5 (\$15), came with broccoli beef, pork fried rice, sweet and sour pork, and an egg roll. The broccoli beef perked me up — the thin cuts of beef were supple, and the long-trunked broccoli somewhat more lifelike than the roughage on my previous plates. The sweet and sour pork, with the sweet violet-hued edge, was appropriately cooked, still soft and juicy. The egg roll was more than just crust. The pork fried rice, though, was a ruse. While I wasn't ready to get my microscope out, there were almost no visible additions of pork, no veggies. It was just a salted, seasoned rice — as if stirred around in the bare minimum of pork vapors.

But, rice — and price — aside, the dish delivered a tad more than I expected of a rote combo. On the

### GREAT WALL RESTAURANT & LOUNGE

Rating: ★★

4340 U.S. Highway 101,  
Gearhart

PHONE: 503-738-4108

HOURS: 11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; noon to 9:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

PRICE: \$\$ — Some dishes are a few dollars more than you'd think

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Tofu available, veggies a little lacking

SERVICE: Hamstrung by the dense menu

DRINKS: Full bar, coffee, soda

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

other hand, it's still a rote combo. And there are hardly any avenues of the menu that offer deeper immersion. I thought of New Garden, the third Chinese restaurant in the Seaside-Gearhart area (which I reviewed back in February). New Garden, too, is primarily Americanized fare. But there are some gems to find, like the transfixing (and nicely priced) Eggplant with Hot Garlic Sauce. It seemed to me there was little of such distinction at Great Wall. That said, I can see why folks would want to hang out there — and maybe even have a bite from time to time.

My final fortune cookie shared the following advice, something Great Wall too might heed: "Need some adventure or enjoyment? Take a vacation."