

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Cannon Beach holiday food event offered global flavors, great dining

Review and photos by  
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Court Carrier's idea for the Holiday Foods Around the World Celebration came from an event he attended a few years ago. It mixed food and music, pairing regional cuisines with matching performances. For example: Italian and opera. Carrier, the executive director of Cannon Beach's Chamber of Commerce, sought to do something similar. He invited the city's restaurants to expand their inspirations for an evening and create a dish reflecting a foreign country.

Nine restaurants signed up. Largely the countries of inspiration were European. Some — like EVOO, which chose Sicily, and Newman's 988 with France — played it safe, proffering the same regionally rooted cuisines on which the foundations of their restaurants are cemented. However, Bill's Tavern and Brewhouse (Mexico), Season's Cafe (Thailand) and The Bistro (Vietnam) reached beyond Eurocentrism.

My first trip was to The Bistro. I was excited to see what new owner and chef Jack Stephenson was up to. I knew he came with a pedigree as a corporate chef, as well as with a background in French and Vietnamese styles. (Remember: The cuisines are intertwined as the French colonized Vietnam in the 19th century.) For the occasion, Stephenson created a three-course menu including Bun Tom Xao (a shrimp noodle salad), Ga Kho Gung (a spicy caramel chicken) and a Ginger Lemongrass Panna Cotta. But on this evening I was prepared neither to eat nor pay for three courses (\$45). I opted instead for the Ga Kho Gung, which is on the regular menu. (The starter and dessert, though, were created for the event.)

It was a frigid evening a few days after Christmas. The streets were barren, but the Bistro's bar was packed with revelers eating,



**Above:** Seasons Cafe's Red Curry married sweet and salty with forward heat and healthy veggies.

**Above right:** The Wayfarer's Spanish paella featured succulent prawns and bright bell peppers.

**Right:** The salty caramel chicken of the Gha Ko Gung played well against the accompanying sharp kim chi-topped rice, but the dish at The Bistro could have used a little more kim chi.

drinking and singing along with lively folk tunes (via Rose and Thistle). With candles twinkling, glasses clinking and tables teeming, it was an ideal of holiday spirit — a warm, welcoming, cozy and rosy-cheeked celebration.

The Ga Kho Gung, spendy for chicken at \$25, came as two clusters — one of white rice, crowned with kim chi slaw, the other a cup of chicken in sauce. The chicken was cut into finger-sized pieces, likely to maintain a proper sauce-to-meat ratio. The salty, caramel liquid had hints of many things — soy, ginger, nuttiness and so on. It played well against the sharp kim chi — so much so I wished there had been more slaw. When I ran out, the sweetness of the caramel started stacking up.

Next I went to the Wayfarer, which had adopted Spain as its country of cuisine. I crossed my fingers that would produce paella and celebrated upon arrival. The

dish will forever take me back to my first trip to Spain at age 19: I remember dining in the open air of a centuries-old square and being taken aback by prawns, complete with heads, eyes and legs.

The Wayfarer's version included only the tails. But, my God, were they succulent, luscious enough to elicit moans, so flavorful as to make me wonder if the others I'd been eating were some different species. They were surrounded by a buttery base of rice and a sprinkling of other seafoods, including mussels, clams, calamari and a few coin-sized slices of Olympic Provisions sausage. Besides the prawns, though, I was most impressed by the bell peppers — yes, the bell peppers. Like the prawns, they were brighter than all the others. While I quite enjoyed digging through the open-faced pan, the dish never quite overcame the sum of its parts. But, all the same, the sum of those parts approached as-



tronomical. Indeed, the Wayfarer's pantry is filled with ingredients from exquisite purveyors.

Like the inverse of the Ga Kho Gung, the saltiness of the paella kept creeping. It could've used more fat, perhaps, or vegetable seasoning. Nonetheless, I wondered why we don't see the dish more on the North Coast as it's one of the premiere seafood showcases. Against cioppino, which I find regularly, paella — more enticing and filling — whips its butt around the block. Indeed, if any chefs or restaurateurs are reading, I beseech you: paella with Oregon seafoods. Thanks, and you're welcome.

My final trip was to Seasons Cafe, which took on Thailand. I appreciated the wholeness of the restaurant's special concoctions for the day: an appetizer, two soups and two entrées. The Tom Ka Gai soup (\$6 cup) reminded me of something my grandmother might

have made — only if my grandmother messed with Asian spices. The yellow curry broth cupped hearty, home-y chunks of chicken, carrot and celery. It was comforting, filling and easy — almost a stew.

The Red Curry (\$17), which I had with shrimp, was a reasonable zag from the yellow curry soup. The red pepper-y sauce was mischievous with forward heat. Together with bean sprouts, zucchini, peppers and a plate of rice, Seasons achieved the most righteous balances. Not only did their offering perfectly mesh sweet and salty — which each stymied the Bistro and Wayfarer — the Seasons Cafe wed indulgent flavors with healthy eating.

As the week came to a close I shed a tear — it ended up being not only some of the better eating but dining I've done. The event invites both restaurants and diners to expand their horizons.

Here's hoping it not only continues in Cannon Beach but is adopted by other cities in the region. For in communities as close-knit as ours, there's potential to come together and explore the world at large.