

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Try some Central Texas barbecue at this Ilwaco eatery

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

We often hear about “Texas barbecue” as if it’s a singular style. But the Lone Star State’s meaty exaltations are divided by regional lines. Each quadrant favors particular methods and ingredients.

East Texas style, for instance, prizes slow-cooking over hickory wood and is slathered in sweet, tomato-based sauces. Central Texas style, while also slow-cooked, prefers pecan or oak wood and spice rubs rather than sauce.

They might sound incremental, but the distinctions are potent.

“You shouldn’t have to put sauce on your meat,” Sandra Mericle told the Coast River Business Journal last fall. The interview was part of a profile on the renovation of Ilwaco’s Sea Hag bar, which had just partnered with Mericle’s Epic Eats. Mericle’s — operated by Sandra and her husband, Preston — hail from Canyon Lake, a town roughly 50 miles north of San Antonio. They are, needless to say, practitioners of the Central Texas barbecue style.

And as someone who often finds barbecue sauces overly sweet, I licked my chops in anticipation.

The Mericles arrived on the North Coast last September. While they’d vacationed in the area before, the move was prompted by an ad they found on Craigslist. The Sea Hag was looking for more than just another cook. The long-running, formerly dive-y bar was — and continues to be — in the midst of total reinvention, and Sea Hag hoped to turn its kitchen over to a partner with ambition and experience.

As such, the Sea Hag and Mericle’s Epic Eats operates almost like a food court. For drinks: Order from the Sea Hag’s long bar. Food and service comes from Mericle’s. Each is paid separately. It works smoothly enough.

Mericle’s kitchen is tiny. With no dish pit, nor staff to man it, food is served on disposable plates. (Note to Mericle’s: Next time buy paper;



Mericle’s Epic Eats inside the Sea Hag has been turning heads with its hand-pressed burgers and with its appetizers like Texas-style poutine.

THE FLAGSHIP BRISKET TAKES 12 TO 14 HOURS TO SMOKE. THE RESULTS ARE UNDENIABLE, WITH A FINISH THAT CANNOT BE UNDERSTATED.

the Northwest abhors Styrofoam.) Nevertheless, everything — from front of house to back — is juggled by Sandra and Preston. They do it admirably, with gracious warmth and humility. Accents aside, you might call it: Southern hospitality.

Before we get to the food, a word about the Sea Hag: It’s still awkward, cavernous and empty like a warehouse, tweaked by unsettling LED lighting but leagues better than the dingy forebearer. It is also still very much a work in progress. On my first trip the space was full of teetering, chest-high tables. A few weeks later they were scattered around, replaced by booths and dining tables that encourage eating more than drinking.

And with Mericle’s comfort food, you’re going to want to sit back, relax ... and maybe loosen your belt.

First, the basics: The Mericles smoke meat every two days. The flagship brisket takes 12 to 14 hours. The results are undeniable, with a finish that cannot be understated.



A Two Meat Plate featuring slow-cooked brisket, pulled pork, coleslaw, barbecue sauce, baked beans, bread pickles and onions.

The way it whispers to your senses — perhaps even your better senses — is irresistible. Such a long tail can only be earned — through hours upon hours of slow cooking.

I began with the Two Meat Plate (\$15.50), choosing brisket and pork (the third option is smoked sausage). It came with meats, a cup of house-made barbecue sauce, and coleslaw on the plate plus one paper boat full of baked beans and another, dry, with onions, pickles and an extra-large thick slice of light white bread. The beans were as you might expect. Of the slaw, Sandra said: “We’re from Texas and we like it spicy, but around here we got complaints it was too spicy.” Bummer. I would’ve liked it hotter. Same went for the Fireball Whiskey-based sauce.

Between the brisket and pulled pork I absolutely favored the beef. Slow cooked from beyond sun-up to sundown, its molecular structure was almost nonexistent, softer than Jell-O, the fats rendered into flesh, melting like butter on a hot pan. I appreciated the simple saltiness of the brisket. While the pork was nothing to scoff at, I may have enjoyed it more as an open-faced sandwich with the added color of briny pickles and crisp, steadfast onions. As far as

Mericle’s porks go, I preferred the sausage. Its flavor is wider — from the succulent inner sweetness to the charred casing — and still includes that lingering, smoky finish.

I had the Smoked Sausage as a sandwich (\$8.50), which worked exceedingly well, better than most any sausage on a circular roll. The meat was artfully sliced into flat, angled spears, then stacked like logs. It was a lot of meat, big as a burger patty at least.

And speaking of burgers, apparently Mericle’s burgers have been turning heads — even in our land of the plenty. “People are saying they’re the some of best on the peninsula,” Preston Mericle said without hubris. The people are right. Mericle’s secrets are two, maybe three-fold.

First is the hand-pressed patty. It’s big, thick and not pounded down. Getting the right density is key during cooking. Second is the seasoning. Beyond salt and pepper, Preston uses a spice mix that includes garlic, onion powders and then some. Third: It’s a great deal, especially at Happy Hour. Served with a heaping side of hand-cut fries for just \$6.50 (from 3 to 6 p.m. every day, including weekends) it’s a

MERICLE'S EPIC EATS

Rating: ★★☆☆

209 1st Ave. (inside the Sea Hag)

Ilwaco, Washington

PHONE: 360-642-5899

HOURS: 2 to 10 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and 4 to 10 p.m. Sunday

PRICE: \$ – Heaping entrées and killer happy hour deals

SERVICE: Charming southern hospitality

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN

OPTIONS: It’s all about the meats

DRINKS: Sea Hag offers a full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

bargain to be reckoned with.

As for fries, Mericle’s also offers a Texas-style poutine that’s so smooth, easy, cheesy, peppery and bacon-covered that you might need a nap after. There are plenty of other calorically frightening appetizers, like fried pickles and chili fries, as well as rotating specials. I tried the Brisket and Pulled Pork Quesadilla (\$8.50) and was heartened — sorry — to find more meats than cheese inside. Well, I suppose there could’ve been more cheese.

But it’s rare you’re wanting more at Mericle’s. I twice found myself having eaten my fill then continuing to pick at the massive servings, my eyelids getting heavy. In my eyes, though, that brisket continued to sparkle.

Central Texas, welcome to the North Coast.