

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Uptown Cafe offers mid-tier menu but a local vibe

Review and photos by
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The concrete sprawl of Warrenton's North Coast Retail Center represents one of the region's rare pockets where national chains outnumber locally owned businesses. Among Petco, Staples and Home Depot, Uptown Cafe is an outlier. When it comes to dining, that distinction becomes more pronounced. Nearby there is but a Taco Bell, the Costco food court and the new Panda Express, which, bewilderingly, boasts long drive-thru lines seemingly every time I pass.

Such corporate conglomerations have been known to welcome the likes of an Applebee's or a Chili's. And while Uptown Cafe doesn't fit those molds precisely, the comparison is not without some merit — for Uptown Cafe is also family friendly, offers reasonable prices, substantial portions and familiar, ketchup-dunking dishes. The most obvious differences, besides more festive side-show flavors and corporate "flair"? Uptown Cafe is less a place to watch sports.

Beneath the double-high ceilings, Uptown's reasonably comfy interior is mostly a clean slate. There are a few embellishments to the silvery, aquamarine palette like floating glass balls and metallic fish. There's also plenty of wood. The substantial bar and benches were salvaged from historic regional buildings in the Warrenton-Astoria area.

The menu is less locally inspired. There are appetizers like chicken wings and onion rings, dinner salads, pastas, burgers, fish and "other meaty stuff," such as New York steak and barbecue ribs. Nothing you haven't had before. Without hesitation, two different servers told me that the Fish Tacos (\$10) were Uptown's most popular dish.

Quickly the tacos emerged with

UPTOWN CAFE IS FAMILY FRIENDLY, OFFERS REASONABLE PRICES, SUBSTANTIAL PORTIONS AND FAMILIAR, KETCHUP-DUNKING DISHES.



a cup of mostly minced tomato parts, watery and mild, allegedly pico de gallo. The taco's ingredients, meanwhile, were almost imperceptible from the grocery store's most packaged: medium-sized flour tortillas, bagged, premixed coleslaw, and frozen, beer-battered cod. Uptown Cafe adds an almost imperceptible layer of cheddar cheese, which has no business in a fish taco. (Try cotija.) They also use Baja sauce, which has a subtle kick, but is hardly a savior. The dish cried out for something, anything — a semblance of finesse, exciting ingredients or expressive taste. I remain perplexed why these bland, basic fish stick tacos are Uptown Cafe's



Above: Though the fish tacos at Uptown Cafe are popular, the Mouth didn't find them special.

Left: The Petit Filet had a colorful presentation and was a serviceable but unremarkable steak

buttery peppercorn ranch multiplied fat and salt contents. Tall and barrel-chested, all together the Peppered Pig burger was a big, gluttonous, greasy delight. Cholesterol spikes aside, it was far more enjoyable than the fish tacos. A better deal, too.

But my mood dipped again with the The Avocobbo (\$10), Uptown's take on the Cobb salad. Note: The original Cobb salad includes avocado. The differences: rather than grilled or roasted chicken, the Avocobbo substitutes chicken fingers, which act like chicken croutons. There were no onions as the original calls for nor red wine vinaigrette. I found the olives rather incongruous (though some Cobb recipes use them). Either way, the Avocobbo was less exuberant, less lean and mean than the namesake. The delivery was also unwieldy. In a bowl shaped like a 1960s mid-century-modern ball chair, the tilted, sloping edge seemed designed to dump salad into my lap.

most popular item.

A cynical take? Perhaps it's about margins.

Either way, the burgers were much better. In my trips to Uptown, I saw a whole lot more burgers being served than tacos. With a steak knife jutting out of the top, each one was easy to spot.

I had the Peppered Pig (\$10). I went with the 1/3-pound patty, which was pre-formed. (For a dollar more you can upgrade to a 1/2-pound patty.) Besides the usual lettuce and tomato it was loaded with pepper jack cheese, thick peppery bacon and breaded onions that resembled the shards of rings, only with more bread and less onion. A dousing of

UPTOWN CAFE

Rating: ★★↓

1639 SE Ensign Lane, Warrenton

PHONE: 503-245-1400

HOURS: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday, and 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

PRICE: \$ – Entrées around \$10

SERVICE: Youthful and enthusiastic

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: Slim

DRINKS: Full bar, soda, coffee, juice

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

The colorful presentation of the Petit Filet (\$17) was more enticing. There were red bell peppers, green broccoli and white onions, all of which were made to kneel by the bacon they were cooked with. The white hill of potatoes were whipped and buttery. The red onions adorning the steak had become even more purple, soaking up the red wine demi-glace, keeping it all to themselves. The six-ounce beef tenderloin was cooked to an appropriate medium rare, and there was hardly a spot of fat on it. There also wasn't a whole lot of fat rendered into it. This was a serviceable but unremarkable steak.

The same could be said of Uptown Cafe's menu at large: It neither upends nor transcends the corporate surroundings. The vibe, however, at least reflects the local pulse.