

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Chinook restaurant offers handsome interior, heavenly cornbread

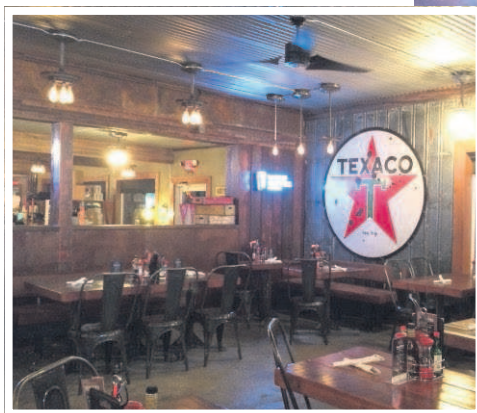
Review and photos by
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The Opening Soon sign sat in front of the Columbia River Roadhouse for months, so long folks began to doubt it. Eventually a reassurance was tacked on: "Really!"

Indeed, renovation of the building that would house the Chinook restaurant took much, much longer than expected. What began in October 2014 and was thought to be in the home stretch toward the end of 2015 finally opened late last summer. And while a significant portion of that time-consuming work was in replacing the building's creaky electrical and plumbing, fabrication of the interior was equally extensive.

The Roadhouse is replete with custom metal work. The chairs, tables and bar — as well as so many little flourishes — are hand-welded. The walls and ceilings are coated in corrugated metal siding. Coat racks and door handles are cobbled together from wrenches and hammers. License plates and gas station memorabilia dot the walls. Edison light bulbs dangle from light fixtures made of old car parts. Reflecting the many blazing neon signs and flat-screen TVs, all of it is gleaming, both raw and buffed, heavy and slick.

Creating the menu, one imagines, was less arduous. Joining Castaway's Seafood Grille and Stormin' Norman's, the Columbia River Roadhouse is ownership's third restaurant on the Long Beach Peninsula. The fare mostly dovetails with the vintage highway theme — big, meaty throwbacks. It's familiar. I overheard one customer inquire if this was a chain, related to a Roadhouse-themed joint in Salem where folks toss shells of free peanuts on the floor. While there are free peanuts at the Columbia River Roadhouse, there is no



The Columbia River Roadhouse in Chinook, Washington, is replete with custom metal work.

association. "The peanuts are on the house," a server said, "but not on the floor." It's also worth a mention that while there is a full bar, the place is family friendly. (Along with a cheeky gift shop, an adjacent wing hosts 15-odd pinball machines.) To be sure: This "Road House" is a far cry from Patrick Swayze's.

The menu is big. It feels like there's a lot to choose from, though the options aren't especially broad. There are sandwiches, burgers, seafood, steaks and so on. Some dishes are marked with icons: the chili pepper, of course, supposes a "Southern kick of heat"; the RH designation, a server explained, meant the dish was specially made in-house. I figured I'd stick mostly to RHs.

Among them is Fall-off-the-Bone BBQ Ribs, which are served with the "signature RH Bourbon BBQ Sauce." I wasn't hungry enough for a full rack (\$23.99) nor a half (\$18.99). I zeroed in on the "Lite Bites" section of the menu, which offered three ribs and two sides for \$12.99, and wouldn't require an after-dinner nap. For sides I went with the Fried Okra and Broccoli and Squash. To my delight, a piece of Cornbread with Honey Butter was tossed in by the kitchen.

I like to think the kitchen



The Mouth tried the Lite Bites version of ribs, which came with three ribs, broccolini, squash, cornbread and fried okra.

shepherded me in a direction the servers didn't, as the cornbread absolutely made the meal. It was critical, buttressing the plate's comfort — like pillow top on a mattress. The fried okra were crispy, a vegetable alternative to tater tots. The broccolini and squash were sopped with butter. The ribs themselves — and there were four rather than three — were hardly falling off the bone. But the crusted edges appropriated something nearing jerky, which I found enjoyable in its own right. The Roadhouse's own barbecue sauce was easy, neither too spicy nor too sweet. Really it was the cornbread that was most irresistible, the ideal counterpart to the fatty meats and elemental veggies, a crumbly, simple, lightly sweet, spongy bread, with butter and honey on top and bottom.

I found no such value, character or comfort in either the Po Boy (\$13.99) or Tex-Mex Blackened Fish Tacos (\$14.99). The Po Boy, which I had with prawns, came "dressed," i.e., with lettuce and tomato. Should you want the more familiar version you're free to make it yourself — slaw and pickles came on the side. But even after reconfiguration, the

sandwich was lacking. To call the doughy, un-crust-ed bread a "French baguette" is more than a stretch. Moreover, it was just plain bland — with none of the slurpy, tangy, messy goodness I look for in the Creole classic.

While off the mark, at least the Po Boy came with a side of thick steak fries. At \$15 a la carte the Tex-Mex Blackened Fish Tacos neared highway robbery. The cod did have a slight char, but there wasn't a whole lot of it. To be sure: We're talking about two just-larger-than-street-style tacos on white corn tortillas with a heap of with a mango salsa. You might recognize the salsa — cubed mango, red onions, cilantro and a few potent slices of jalapeño — from the Roadhouse's sister restaurant, Castaway's Seafood Grille.

In ensuing trips I returned to red meat. The burger was ... a burger. With a pre-formed patty, the bun — which was similar to the one on the Po Boy — made better sense here. Otherwise, it was nothing out of the ordinary.

The Meatloaf (\$15.99), a blend of beef, pork and veal, was home-style. Like an iPhone-sized brick, the loaf was really salty,

COLUMBIA RIVER ROADHOUSE

782 U.S. Highway 101, Chinook, Washington

Rating: ★ ★ ★

360-777-8223

HOURS: 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily

PRICE: \$\$ – Both good and lacking values

SERVICE: Friendly, easygoing

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Pescatarian? Nary a veggie burger.

DRINKS: Full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

light on herbs, onions and bread-y filler. Along with a nice bit of caramelization and darkened edges, the top and bottom were coated with strips of bacon. (Not wholly, as the menu suggested, "bacon wrapped.") Served on a platter with cornbread and choice of sides, I found myself, with Creamy Mac-N-Cheese and Yukon Gold Mashed Potatoes, adrift in a sea of basic, starchy, buttery salts. Once again though, that cornbread, flecked with whole, supple kernels — was what I couldn't get enough of.

After my meal I lingered, sipped a beer, and appreciated the handiwork and the elbow grease that the welders put into the Roadhouse's handsome interior. And while ownership of this growing peninsula conglomerate were clearly willing to invest in building a handsome restaurant, significant portions of the menu longed for that same personal touch.