

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Community comes together over spicy dishes in Fiery Food Festival

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The competition began as so many others have: while boasting at the bar.

It was elk season. The topic turned to chili. "Mine's the best," one said. "I can do better than you," another barked. "Alright, well next week we'll see."

And lo, some 20 years ago, Wes and Wally's Fiery Food Festival was born.

There was another at the bar — the Relief Pitcher in Seaside — who wanted to compete but wasn't a chili man. Instead then, it would be a contest pitting spicy foods.

Early years saw competitors trying to outdo one another with tongue-scorching heat. Over the decades, though, it's become more about developing compelling flavors with a fiery kick.

Near the end of February, in exchange for \$5 at the door of the Relief Pitcher, I was handed a ballot, on which I would vote for my top three dishes. There were no official judges; winners would be selected democratically. Each person who placed in the top three would receive a plaque, a pair of cast iron pans and a portion of the proceeds (about \$70 dollars each).

The dishes were mostly set atop a covered pool table. They came in crock pots, cupped in pyrex and on cookie sheets. There were 11 in total, which organizers lamented was less than the usual 20-odd entries (and sometimes as many as 30). Nonetheless, it seemed like plenty of food to me, an occasion not flagging for lack of participation. About a third of the concoctions were desserts, which, I was told, reflected recent trends. Co-founder Wes told me about his first sweet entry to the contest: an apple pie that included cayenne in the filling and habanero in a caramel topping.

After a few welcoming words from Wes and Wally the tasting began. A line snaked through the



The hottest dish by far was the Satan's Sweets hard candy.

standing-room-only crowd. The charge was simple: Take only one taste until everyone got a chance to try. Then attendees were free to go to town on the leftovers. Alongside the entries were piles of orange slices and Texas toast, to help cut the spice. (I thought milk or ice cream would've been more effective.)

Most dishes were designed to be single serving: a chicken wing, a meatball, a dainty cup of chipotle chocolate pot de creme. I filled my plate with one of everything and tried to find a place to sample comfortably — the joint was packed.

Well, OK, I didn't get to try everything — the prawns in the Louisiana Mt. Goat Peckers were finished by the time I got there. There was still plenty of sauce, though, which I slurped up. It was green and soupy, with a sinus-clearing plume of horseradish. I asked the creator about his concoction. "There's no set recipe," he said. "I used enchilada sauce, peppers, horseradish, pretty much just all the things I had in my

cabinets. I couldn't replicate it if I tried."

Others, though, were more precise. The Fireballs were labored over intently, twice baked, once before and once after the application of a sweet and sour glaze. While not hot enough to make you jam your aching tongue under the faucet, they offered a fine tinkle, compliments of habanero and Fireball whisky. The same could be said for the 20 Year Chili, named for the fest's anniversary. With cubes of London broil, pork and hamburger, no beans and only scant veggies, it was a meat party. The base was salty, with a tinge of tomato and creeping heat. Again, nothing too wild.

Of all the dishes, the hottest was the Satan's Sweets hard candy. Prepared by Wes' grandson, it came in five levels: from Mild Maple to Strawbanero Orange. With an "Extremely HOT" warning label, the broken glass-like shards of Strabanero were composed of reduced habanero peppers. I had a coin-sized nibble, which set my



The food was served pot-luck style, and attendees sampled a portion of each dish before voting for their top three picks.



The Chipotle Pot De Creme was offered in single-serving cups.

tastebuds on high alarm. While crunching more of the glassy adult candy could've made steam kettles of my mouth, nose and ears, the nibbles were not as righteous as a raw habanero itself.

Which is probably for the best — a party that leaves revelers with pangs of crippling indigestion isn't the kind you want to keep coming back to. Here it was pleasure over pain.

Still, sampling dish after dish, the heat compounded. My cheeks moistened, my tongue and throat tingled, and the endorphins began to flow. After the sampling session, everyone seemed extra perky.

With a simple, buttery, tomato-based sauce, the shrimp gumbo, with its big slices of sausage, was the kind of comfort food I wanted to eat big bowls of. In corn chip bowls, the bite-sized Chipotle Bacon Jam, ornamented with a puff of jalapeño sour cream, boasted multitudes. Sweet, gooey, crisp, salty, savory and bite-sized, they would make high-class Super Bowl snacks.

Chipotle peppers too were found in the Chipotle Pot De Creme, which transferred spice's edgy essence into something silky and smooth, a pudding-like consistency. In a contest that was mostly played down the middle, the pot de creme was a tad subversive, taking liberties with form.

There were two riffs on jerk chicken, and I was absolutely taken with the bone-in variety, called "Jamaica Me 'Hot.'" The green, blended sauce was citrus-y, vibrant and rewardingly complex. The texture too was divine. I asked its creator, Marco, about the recipe, and he was happy to share. The marinade included lime juice, ginger, Worcestershire, allspice berries, soy sauce, nutmeg, thyme, brown sugar, habanero and a good deal more. The recipe, Marco said, is one he's been pushing and pulling at for years. It was, however, the first time he unveiled it at the Fiery Foods Festival, a competition in which he professes to be the most-decorated winner. And the care he put into these wings was apparent; he created the sauce days prior, to help it deepen.

My ballot was as such: Marco's "Jamaica Me 'Hot'" wings first, the Chipotle Pot de Creme second, the Chipotle Bacon Jam chips in third. I wasn't far off. The official winners were announced a few minutes later: The Bacon Jam chips took high honors, followed by Marco's Jamaican wings; Wes' "20 Year Chili" came in third.

And while bragging rights will, I'm sure, be touted in the weeks and months to come, it became clear to me that the Fiery Foods Festival is much more about community, about coming together and sharing over food.

"Where else are you going to eat this well for \$5?" one attendee said. Where else, I wondered, would relative strangers enjoy a single meal and leave feeling like family?