

McMenamins makes good on chain's promise

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

GEARHART — As many with many Oregonians, my relationship with McMenamins goes way back — nearly two decades.

Besides maybe a burger at the East 19th St. Cafe in Eugene, adjacent to the University of Oregon campus, my formative memories of McMenamins came around turn of the century, at the Crystal Ballroom in Portland. I went for concerts and caught regional bands on their way to becoming national stars.

There were weddings (and more concerts) at Edgefield Winery, too, and regular trips to the sprawling Kennedy School, which was just a few blocks away from my old home. The former elementary school campus offered numerous bars, gardens, a movie theater, cigar bar, and my favorite: the soaking pool.

All these jewels of the McMenamins empire bear enticing similarities in design and layout, almost as if they were created by the same architect. These historically repurposed complexes are massive, heavy and near labyrinthian, string together individual, intimate spaces. The impressive property holdings are almost like an alternative, private register of Oregon's historic buildings.

The Sand Trap in Gearhart is no different. Though the hotel, with its creaky, dark, heavy woodwork, feels a hundred-odd years old, it's not. A fire destroyed the original structure. It was rebuilt in 1998 and acquired by McMenamins in 2008. It fits seamlessly within the company's aesthetic. There are rooms upon rooms, spaces upon spaces. In dark bars, lights twinkle off glassware. The effect is surreal, time-warping. Every hall, door and stairway offers possibility: sure, perhaps it dead ends in a storage closet, but maybe there's a pocket bar, music venue or who-knows-



Expedition Elk Burger.

what to be discovered.

These grand environments almost always take first billing at McMenamins — their food and beer rarely the hook, are secondary. Setting reigns supreme.

In 2017, the Sand Trap menu underwent some renovation, though I can't speak to what it was like before. I can say that, in the long run, the company's food and drink have certainly evolved.

At the Sand Trap, it's mostly fancy pub food: burgers, sandwiches, a few requisite seafood standbys, pizza, salads and dinner entrees, like salmon and steak.

It's largely familiar, comfortable fare that's been refined, punched up in hopes of keeping pace with Portland's ever-growing food-forward culture. A good portion of the dishes are made their own by the inclusion of McMenamins products, such as wine sauces, beer battering, marinades and other condiments. (In particular their sharp, spicy, wine-laced Dijon is a sinus-clearing delight.)

While on the whole I struggled on how to sample a cross section that would be representative of the wide menu, one item jumped off the

page: The Expedition Elk Burger (\$18). With all respect and cognitive dissonance to Gearhart's local herd, I'm in rapturous love with lean red meats like elk or bison.

The inch-thick elk patty came out truly medium rare — right on the nose. But relatively rare game is just the beginning. The stout burger is slathered with a grainy, salty, gooey, sweet bacon jam; a pungent, smooth black garlic aioli that silences the white cheddar and the requisite roughage. Even with the sultry, fatty accoutrements, the elk burger is a lean puncher.

Just like the flavor is a tack from the regular beef hamburger, so is the effect. Where a beef burger is something you eat at the end of a long day to unwind, one could have an elk burger as fuel to begin. Afterward you stand up straight, full-chested, ready to chop then carry a cord of wood.

I was similarly enlivened by the Kale and Steak Salad (\$16.25), from a specials menu that's refreshed every two weeks. Described as a "very green-tasting salad" the creamy and acidic Caesar dressing, along with a generous sprinkling of Parmesan, proved



Pot Bunker Macaroni and Cheese.



Steak and Kale Caesar.

a terrific kale-delivery vehicle. Along for the ride, too, were some equally earthy Brussels sprouts, cucumbers, radicchio, cherry tomatoes and croutons. The steak, though, was a letdown. First, there wasn't much of it. Second, it was chewy like rubber and full of connective tissue. A mix of odd cooking — pink inside, yet still tough as a car tire — and improper cuts. Almost a quarter of the already small portion was inedible gristle. The rest wasn't much better.

There are other enticing menu items — such as the Hogshead Salmon Sandwich or Baked Wild Alaskan Cod — that would seem to meld eating healthy with delectable joy, but the more gluttonous end deserved exploration, too. And none seemed more decadent than the Pot Bunker Crab Mac and Cheese, replete with Dungeness crab. At the same time I wondered: could mac and cheese really justify at \$22 price tag?

The answer is yes and no. Obviously, crab is expensive. And there was a reasonable amount of it mixed in, sinewy fibers coated in viscous cheese, mingling with heavy cream, tracing the contours

MCMENAMINS SAND TRAP PUB

Rating: ★★☆☆

1157 N Marion Ave, Gearhart

PHONE: 503-717-8150

HOURS: 11 a.m.-8 p.m.
Monday-Saturday

PRICE: \$\$ — Entrees between mid-teens and mid-20s

SERVICE: Personable, knowledgeable, on point.

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN
OPTIONS: A few.

DRINKS: Full bar, soda, coffee, tea

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

of large macaroni elbows. The bowl, with a layer of breadcrumbs to approximate a crunchy, burnt top, wasn't much hotter than lukewarm. And that was a shame — it should've been scalding hot. The top should've really been cooked to a true, singed crisp. The crab did provide a salty, oceanic erudition, though together it never transcended the sums of its parts. It was nice, not quite irresistible; enjoyable but pricey.

For a group to dine the most economical option is probably pizza, which is still spendy (larges run from \$26.25 to \$32.75, 8-inch personal pies from \$11.50-14.25). The marinara is sweet and the mozzarella stretchy, but it's the medium-thin crust that's the star, both crisp and pillowy soft.

Again, fine food — but with more than a pretty penny tacked on to pay for such ambiance.