

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## SUSHI POP-UP FEEDS THE DEMAND

Review and photos by  
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Hosting a sushi pop-up the last weekend in March, the Osprey Cafe's already tight quarters in Seaside were overflowing. It was a madhouse, high on Friday evening and anticipation for something — perhaps ironic, surely tragic — that North Coast residents can't normally get: top-quality sushi made from local catches. Hopefuls jammed the entryway, waiting upward of an hour, trying not to drool as plates of glistening fish passed by en route to the precious few tables and booths.

The crowds were drawn not only by the promise of oceanic delicacy, but the rare collaboration of three prominent North Coast chefs: private chef and three-time Iron Chef Goes Coastal defending champion Jonathan Hoffman; former proprietor of Roll and Bowl cart and longtime sushi chef Bryan Tiller; and Joshua Bokish, winner of 2016 Iron Chef Goes Coastal People's Choice Award and owner of the Osprey. Sharing in the belief that the region is abundant, and that North Coast diners are eager for meals that expand its possibility, the three took a chance on a limited engagement.

Each chef brought a distinctive skillset. Tiller, who's studied under four master sushi chefs, was in charge of sashimi, nigiri and rolls. Hoffman contributed appetizers, entrees and desserts. Bokish mixed sake-based cocktails.

The lion's share of ingredients at the pop-up were both seasonal and locally sourced. Some — like wild onions and nettles — were foraged by the chefs themselves. The seafood too revolved around regional, in-season catches, including Dungeness crab, albacore tuna,



The Cove: Tempura fried Dungeness crab, spring salmon, cream cheese, avocado and sweet chilli aioli.

and the centerpiece: an 18-pound springer salmon. (Springers, the first to return to the river, are the fattiest; they're scarce, sought after and spendy.)

We began with sake-based drinks, an Osprey specialty. Truly, Bokish is a wizard with rice wine, hardly limited by only being able to sell beer and wine (no hard alcohol). The Sakerita" (\$8) magically mirrored the namesake margarita whilst forgoing the traditional ingredients. It was miraculously synthesized instead from kiwi sorbet, yuzu curd, cranberry rhubarb, candied kumquat and sake. Delicious.

Pretty quickly plates emerged, beginning a steady trickle. First, a bowl of edamame (\$4) punched up with green garlic and chili sauce. Then the most distinct dish of the evening: Scallop Crudo (\$9) artfully plated in two long rows of spheres. One array was a scallop sliced into thin, off-white medallions. Each slice was mirrored by a collection of red, pickled watermelon. The white scallops were topped with shavings of miso-cured egg yolk. The plate too was adorned with

swirls of almond coconut cream. Enticing and tantalizing, sweet, smooth and almost gelatinous, the bites were textural sensations. Slurping sleek ocean spray with tangy fruit, and rich, milky cream, the concept succeeded on all levels, from aesthetics to flavor and feel.

Our first roll, The Ocean Osprey (\$11), with local greens, kimchi, pickled burdock, smoked albacore tuna and dotted with sweet chili aioli, was complex and balanced. Against parts sweet, spicy and acidic, the smoked tuna outlasted the swirl.

The came the nigiri, pure and unmeddled. The springer salmon (\$7), a vivid orange with rivers of luscious fats, was outstanding, buttery, melty. The seared, thin tuna tataki (\$6), though, was overdone, a bit dry.

The fried Salmon Skin Maki Roll (\$6) was a salty, crispy, chewy, oily delight. Almost like a jerky, it was a welcome swerve — not toward true gluttony, per se, but hardly abstinence. Served warm, The Oregon Roll (\$7) was a surprise. With avocado, cucumber, hazelnut oil, crab,



Seasider: Local greens, avocado, cucumber, mango, salmon, shisho mint with lemons.



Oregon Roll: Dungeness crab, avocado, cucumber, hazelnut oil, topped with spicy albacore.

served on lemon and topped with "spicy albacore dynamite" that was smooth and creamier than it was spicy. The Surf 'n' Turf (\$9) was wrapped in a paper-thin layer of New York strip. Daintily, minimally seared, it added a slippery, fatty casing, but not quite the salty, savoriness of a steak bite.

While there were no vegetarian rolls, the Seasider (\$8) pushed the garden to the forefront with shisho mint — like a cross of mint and basil. Those herbaceous wisps danced with pangs of lemon and gooey sweet mango; so much so, the salmon almost became secondary.

This seems as good a time as any to mention that there were a few entrees on the menu: Spring Salmon (\$28), Koji Flank Steak (\$24) and Ramen (\$14). I didn't try any of them. And besides a few orders of ramen, neither did anyone else. While wonderful in their own right, I'm sure, the draw of the night was sushi.

Our last roll, The Cove (\$13), was the heartiest. It should've come with a warning: multiple eager diners burned their tongues on the freshly tempura-fried fireball. After letting cool to nearly-scalding, it was a crunchy, oily, soy-sauced joy — a perfect, eggy crust cradling molten cream cheese and plenty of crab.

We enjoyed the desserts, including the minuscule Mochi Butter Cake (\$8), accompanied by kiwi sorbet, yuzu curd, cranberry rhubarb jam and candied kumquat. It was gone in a moment. The coconut-milk based chocolate gelato with salted caramel was as simple as it was irresistible. We leaned back in our chairs and lingered, satisfied.

While we were one of the last tables of the evening, similar lingering — almost inherent in sushi dinners and why tatami rooms exist — clogged the service. Such slow paced, relaxing is almost anathema to a pop-up that needs to turn tables to make their nut.

Early in the evening, it seemed, the hosts became aware of the challenges of such a limited engagement. While they proved that demand for excellent sushi is bubbling on the North Coast, balancing that demand over time is a complex, multifaceted question — one they'll need to address before they repeat the event, or turn it into something more.

Here's hoping these talented chefs find the answers to the business side, as their skills in the kitchen are bona fide. And, indeed, there's so much more that can be done with the North Coast's most bountiful catches than just baking or grilling them on a plate with potatoes. Perhaps nothing showcases the majesty of the springer salmon more than eating it raw.