

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

THE BISTRO: REVITALIZED AND REFINED

Story and photos by
THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Late last year, Jack Stephenson bought The Bistro in Cannon Beach.

Prior to relocating from the San Francisco Bay area, Stephenson oversaw dozens of restaurants for a management group. Before that, there were stints at large hotel chains and Disney World. In these positions, Stephenson's focus was on the macro: banquet events and corporate constellations that served thousands of diners each day.

Now, while piloting an intimate restaurant in a small tourist town, he's dealing in the dozens.

Stephenson appears to be embracing these more direct connections. He regularly patrols The Bistro's dining room and bar, introducing himself, describing dishes and listening. He makes a point of highlighting how he makes dishes his own. Indeed, Stephenson takes the work quite personally, entwining great pride and pressure.

Perhaps after decades in the profit-driven, corporate world, Stephenson's hands-on, one-to-one immersion at The Bistro is an expected response. Here, he is reconnecting to the heart of the chef-diner relationship, a place where passion can trump the bottom line.

After taking the reins at The Bistro, Stephenson rewrote the entire menu (save for the linguine, which was apparently too popular to let go).

While at first glance the Bistro's menu may appear 'de rigueur' for fine dining — steak, chowder, crab cakes, etc. — deeper inspection unveils clever tweaking. Fine ingredients aren't enough; there has to be a swerve, a zig where others zag. He does so by layering techniques: Asian flourishes atop a base of French classicism. These signatures aren't wholesale reinventions, but meaningful



Draper Girls Pear-Brined Pork Chop

nonetheless.

A few holdovers of Bistro's past remain in the simply dressed, softly lit restaurant, most notably staff and musical traditions.

On Wednesdays, Thistle and Rose strum folk tunes that lead to dialogues and soft, breathy singalongs. On Saturdays, classical guitar nuzzles an already palpable romanticism. While unobtrusive, The Bistro's live music is an undeniable mood elevator.

Over the course of multiple trips, I found myself drawn to the bar side. And it's worth noting: While the Bistro's entrées can be quite spendy, there are some fine values found only in the bar.

In fact, one of the most enjoyable meals I had was also one of the most thrifty. For less than the price of an average entrée I combined the Duck Confit and Warm Beet Salad (\$11.50) with the Chicken Meatball Marinara Sandwich (\$8.75, only available in the bar).

With house-fermented cream, pomegranate seeds and duck fat vinaigrette, the duck salad contained multitudes. It was salty, earthy, tangy, acidic, creamy and a heck of a delivery vehicle for beets. Cooked in luscious duck fat, how could it not be? The sinewy duck itself was rich and juicy. Besides sharp sweetness, the pomegranate seeds proffered an exciting textural pop. Listed as an appetizer — and, yes, it would be grand to share — the dish



Chicken meatball marinara

worked, too, like a dinner salad, one where health and indulgence meet.

The bread on the meatball sub — like all the bread at the Bistro — is made in-house. In between were greens, an herby marinara smothering well-seasoned chicken meatballs and a cozy blanket of Gouda cheese. It was tall and sloppy, a finger-licking delight that flirted with simple perfection. At \$8.75, I wouldn't begrudge anyone who made it a habit. And with prices as they are — the "Cannon Beach price," so to speak — a lower cost to entry is especially welcome.

On the other end of that spectrum is the Caramel Chicken Vietnamese-Style (\$24.75). It's not the most expensive dish (that goes to the \$32.50 New York Steak), but for chicken and rice there is some sticker shock (even if the chicken is "Mary's air chilled organic"). The dish comes in two mounds: a bowl of chicken in bittersweet, salty, slightly spicy caramel sauce, and a hill of white rice crowned with kimchi slaw. The finger-like cuts of chicken maintained an proper ratio of meat to sauce.

For the most part the dish

succeeds. Rice helps to fill it, and the sharp, acidic slaw helps cut the sweetness. But the slaw ran out quickly, and the sugar in the sauce began stacking up — never quite overwhelming, but losing its initial luster.

The chicken, however, was the only minor misstep in the numerous meals I had at the Bistro. Otherwise, down to the complementary bread and irresistible garlic butter, I was blissfully at ease.

The perky pear glaze of the supple, exquisitely charred Draper Girls Pear Brined Pork Chop (\$25.50) was just an opener. I continued to smear the accompanying roasted garlic and tangy agrodolce — a balsamic reduction with raisins and onions — to great effect. A hockey puck of incredibly soft goat milk polenta was an excellent pairing. Its lean clarity played fantastically well with the supple pork (cow's milk would've been too fatty). Like the duck salad, a lot was happening here, but humbly so. The pork chop was a dish that spoke softly but with great confidence and wisdom.

But perhaps it was the Cioppino (\$25.75) that is most emblematic

THE BISTRO

Rating: ★★★★★

263 N. Hemlock St., Cannon Beach

PHONE: 503-436-2661

HOURS: 4:30 p.m.-9 p.m.
Wednesday-Sunday

PRICE: \$\$ - Entrées average
in the mid-\$20s

SERVICE: Confident, unobtrusive

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: A few

DRINKS: Full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

of Stephenson and the new Bistro. Ginger and daishi broth — a Japanese stock including seaweed and shaved, smoked tuna — blessed the fish stew with enlivened Asian inflection, adding depth and holistic complexity. There was rice, too, which, along with cubes of ahi tuna, prawns and scallops, made for a reasonably hearty bowl. On top, a raft of charred bread was plunged in, slathered with a roasted red pepper spread that matched the broth's red hue but twisted its flavor.

Like the best of the Bistro's offerings, the Cioppino was clearly labored over, refined, multifaceted and distinct. For these are Stephenson's goals. And while there remains some room for him to explore the more outer reaches of modern culinary creativity and local bounty, he has revitalized The Bistro in short order. It is nothing if not his own.

It's amazing what going small can do.