

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Clemente's, at once upscale and humble

Review and photos by
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I never made it to the old Clemente's. When they packed up from the Carruthers Building in early 2015 and moved a few blocks northeast to the pier next to the Pilot House, two reasons were given: to become more intimate, and approachable.

And while they've ditched the white tablecloths and a reportedly cavernous dining room, Clemente's Cafe & Public House is still pretty spiffy for a "public house." It inhabits a kind of blurry line between laid back and fancy — a place you're more likely to find a steak than a burger.

The burger, servers told me, is tremendous, but it only appears occasionally. The majority of Clemente's entrées change from night to night. But there are a few standbys you can count on: fish and chips, cioppino, and a NY strip. The specials of the day are listed on a chalkboard near the kitchen. Over the course of my trips, they included salmon (grilled and fried in sandwich), pho and fried asparagus.

Altogether, the night-to-night choice of entrées was neat and narrow, reflecting the lean, essential Clemente's aesthetic. After going big before, the current Clemente's seems something of a distillation, simplifications of flavor and mood.

I was drawn to the bar and wanted to wring even more view than the tight Columbia-river facing windows would allow. The interior, formerly a boat repair shop, is a reclaimed, handsome, refashioning of retro space — the bright varnished wood of the tables and bar set against the aged, dark beams of the high ceiling.

While the approach and entry to the restaurant can feel a little daunting, odd or awkward (I can't quite put my finger on it, but felt it numerous times), once



Bristol Bay Sockeye with clams, sweet peppers, onion, bacon, basmati rice and fiddleheads.



you're seated it quickly turns easy, relaxed, welcoming. Credit to the young and attentive staff, who do indeed proffer a personable "public house"-type atmosphere.

I was delighted to find poke (a raw fish salad) on the menu which, as far as I can tell, doubles the number of restaurants on the North Coast that serve it. Clemente's offers two variations: regular and spicy. I opted for the Spicy Poke (\$14) and was blown away — not so much by the flavor or heat but by the sheer weight of tuna steak therein. It was downright hefty, a lunch's worth of ice cube-sized bites.

The melty chunks of Albacore were smothered in a sambal-like sauce, enlivened with lime, ginger and soy sauce. Cucumbers provided a crisp cool. It was nicely presented, served in a ladle-like bowl with an arching handle on a white plate, the reds of the sauced fish contrasted against vivid green onions and



Above: NY strip steak with grilled green beans, kale rabe and root mash. **Left:** Spicy poke, consisting of albacore in citrus, soy and ginger marinade.

lettuce, and dotted with black sesame seeds.

I had to go easy on it so as not to spoil my appetite. But the main course — Bristol Bay Sockeye (\$24) — was also teaming. In a shallow bowl the salmon steak, the size of a fat wallet, was served atop rice, surrounded by clams and sautéed veggies, topped with fiddlehead fern tips, which were foraged by the chef himself.

"He's always out there," a server told me, "trying to always feature something from the forest."

The fiddleheads, young ferns, were tight, spiraling adherents to the golden ratio. They looked a bit peculiar and tasted more so. There was a bitterness and a whole lot of earth, kind of like green dirt. The rest was familiar. The peppers and onions were cooked in bacon grease and smacked of it. The clams were unadorned, and the fish could've been more seasoned.

Altogether, the dish was very elemental: a handful of familiar, mostly regional ingredients in their most basic, healthful preparations.

On my second trip, I began

with the House Salad (\$7), of fresh mixed greens, minced hazelnuts and too much of what is otherwise a fine sweet maple vinaigrette. I most enjoyed the blue cheese, from Madrona, an Oregon-based creamery. It was less shy than the usual restaurant blue cheese, unafraid to be pungent and funky.

Sampling the ever-present NY Strip seemed the thing to do, and when I ordered I asked for it to be cooked at the chef's discretion, as if he were having it himself. That information was relayed to the letter, and verified thereafter. A message from chef Clemente came back: He was thankful for someone to trust his judgment, for once.

Ordering it his way was very much the right choice. The strip was lightly crusted, sealed, and purple and buttery inside. And once again: It was much larger than I expected. Said to be something like 12 ounces, it was nearly the size a boot print, and thick as the heel. Shoe metaphors aside, it was tender, not chewy. In the Clemente's aesthetic, it was very minimally prepared, almost like on a BBQ. If there's a way that hunt-

CLEMENTE'S CAFE & PUBLIC HOUSE

Rating: ★★☆☆

175 14th St., No. 180

Astoria, Ore., 97103

PHONE: 503-325-1067

HOURS: Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.

PRICE: \$\$ — Entrées range from teens to mid-20's

SERVICE: Upbeat, personable

VEGETARIAN/VEGAN OPTIONS: A few odds and ends, but no meatless entrées

DRINKS: Full bar, coffee, tea

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

★ Below average

★★ Average

★★★ Good

★★★★ Excellent

★★★★★ Best in region

ers eat steaks, this is it: Big. Not overly fatty cuts, no dainty filets, but hulking slabs of beef.

With the steak again, I got to try new things: a "Kale Rabe," which closely approximated a broccoli rabe by using mature kale stalks after the leaves have been picked, and would otherwise go to waste but are still packed with nutrients; and a root mash that whipped together celeriac, purple and regular yams. I appreciated how the celeriac dialed down the sugars of the yams, which I often find too sweet to enjoy much of.

Despite the clever refashioning of sides, in the end the dish amounted to the known classic: meat and potatoes. Nothing wrong with that, of course, and bless the enormity of that steak. Apart from the flourishes of novel and local ingredients, though, Clemente's hewed closer to a traditional aesthetic. It prizes unobtrusive, healthy, back-to-basics preparation, and the essential over the downright irresistible. It is, at once, upscale and humble.