

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## NANCI & JIMELLA'S JOYOUS CURTAIN CALL

Review and photos by  
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**O**n the final night of service at Nanci & Jimella's Cafe & Cocktails, a devout regular came dressed for the occasion. His tie, dotted with tiny lighthouses, was selected with purpose.

"Nanci and Jimella's has been a beacon," he said, pointing to the tie, a source of "intimate food and friendship."

We shared a cocktail, and the man regaled me with his love of the restaurant and its people. The relationship began with reverence for the "healthy and elevated," regionally inspired cuisine that he said was prepared with "more respect, love and heart than anyone." He told me that he ought to know: As a business traveler who logged over 100,000 miles-per-year while dining on lavish expense accounts, he most looked forward to returning home to Nanci & Jimella's.

But it evolved into much more than food. Everything happens in restaurants, places where we gather to celebrate love, birth and success, as well as to mourn and share hard truths. With the vibrant, easy charm of Nanci Main as host, these bonds were tightly, genuinely forged. "We'll be friends for the rest of our lives," he said.

The man in the lighthouse tie was just one of those dressed to honor. Another came in a formal kilt, adorned with shimmering clasps, tasseled hose and a booming sporan. One pair donned loud Hawaiian shirts patterned with Day of the Dead skeletons — a cheeky play, perhaps, on the restaurant's demise.

To be sure, the evening was more denouement than mourning. Nanci is leaving the restaurant business to "pursue her joy," a slogan she became fond of and posted over the restaurant's exit. She leaves to write the next chapter of an extraordinary life. (Jimella Lucas passed away in 2013.)



ALEX PAJUNAS/THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Nanci Main, left, and Jimella Lucas, who passed away in 2013.

Over four-plus decades as restaurateurs on the Long Beach Peninsula, the duo achieved everything they set out to do, and have the accolades to prove it. Their marks on the Columbia-Pacific region are indelible.

They began with the Ark, a restaurant that revolved around locally fished seafood and seasonal produce. Jimella penned a mission statement stating that the Ark would seek to create "a community connection that galvanizes the practices of sustainable ways. It creates good food as its goal in life, that connects the good table to the good earth."

It was at the Ark that Nanci and Jimella were recognized by the titanic chef and critic James Beard. Growing up partly in Gearhart, Beard was familiar with the region's dining options. "I had doubts that anyone was giving the gifts from the sea its due and I was mistaken!" he wrote years later, in the introduction to the Ark's cookbook. "During this first meal there I felt — and hoped — that this was something that we had all waited for many years."

A beacon indeed. Besides respecting and elevating the local bounty — which Beard noted had heretofore been "to a great extent . . . grossly neglected" — Nanci and Jimella were pioneers as female chefs and restaurateurs in the area.

Through all the years, the head chef at Nanci and Jimella's restaurants, the Ark and the Cafe, was

female. After Jimella passed away, longtime employee Katie Witherbee-Allsup stepped in. (When she decided to move on, Main offered to sell the business to the newly married Witherbee-Allsup, who declined, opting to spend more time with family.)

Truly, Nanci & Jimella's created a place for women to be honored and empowered. Many of the staff, including servers and bartenders, were with the restaurants for years, even decades. The workplace, however, was hardly adverse to men. Three-time defending champion of Iron Chef Goes Coastal, Jonathan Hoffman, cut his teeth on Jimella's watch.

The staff's prowess was on full display that last Saturday in May. Despite end-to-end bookings, they flowed with grace, ease and efficiency, all the while making time for well-wishes, photographs and good-byes. Lesser restaurants would sputter beneath the crush. Nanci & Jimella's cruised effortlessly.

Knowing it would be the restaurant's closing evening, I had made a reservation; it was, regrettably, my first trip. As Nanci & Jimella's was an established, revered quantity, the priority of a review was diminished. Moreover, I figured there was no rush, and that a restaurant that had been around for decades would continue to be. I thought they would be amenable to my own time line. I was wrong to wait, to postpone my joy.



Above: Caesar salad Left: Wedding Tort

(published in 1985), James Beard remarked that, before Nanci and Jimella came along, the region was mostly oblivious to its culinary potential. He remembered "one restaurant in Seaside which served fish but only fried salmon or fried clams or fried cracked crab. No attempt was made to show the contrasting texture and flavors of all the dishes served along the coast." And while Nanci and Jimella threw open the doors to local sourcing and seasonal menus, decades later such restaurants in the region remain rare.

I'm reminded of another recent closing: my beloved Street 14. Whether they knew it or not, by celebrating the North Coast's ingredients, both sea and land, they were part of Nanci and Jimella's lineage. As James Beard did for Nanci & Jimella's, I trumpeted Street 14 to any and all, but sadly had not the wattage. A friend who finally visited, after learning Street 14's closure was imminent, remarked: "I wish I would've known sooner. They were so incredible. I would've gone all the time."

And while these two closings are quite different — Nanci & Jimella's being a joyous curtain call — the reminder remains as poignant as ever: Follow your joy. It's never too late. And, at the same time: It's never too soon.

And so it begins: the search for a new beacon.

Their seafood-heavy offerings were mostly familiar, but it's important to remember that, on the North Coast, Nanci and Jimella's helped make them so. While "made with love" is a concept I often disdain, it's fair to use here; every bite balanced, everything in its right place, not only cooked just so, but with thought and purpose — remember the mission statement.

Every piece of lettuce in the Caesar salad was tossed to ensure an equal, ideal dispersment of dressing. The crab cakes had a snappy golden-brown crust and moist centers. The salmon in the bouillabaisse exquisitely cooked, not a second too long, the broth seasoned beyond complexity, yet still humble, hearty. Then there was the wedding tort, a confection Nanci created a week prior for chef Witherbee-Allsup's ceremony. I imagined that, over the decades, each menu item was imbued with a similar story.

And as Nanci turns the page, a seminal chapter of Columbia-Pacific dining comes to a close.

In the Ark cookbook intro