

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

James Beard, Gearhart legend

Story by
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A chef friend gave me rather loose directions to find the Gearhart cottage where James Beard spent summers as a child.

I knew I was close, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I asked a woman who was out gardening if she could help. Pointing around the corner, down E Street, she knew exactly the place.

"James Beard is a Gearhart legend," she said.

And while others of great fame and note have decamped to the idyllic enclave, perhaps none have been greater ambassadors for the place than Beard. The titanic and influential gourmand, critic, writer, teacher and socialite was effusive when it came not only to Gearhart's "isolated charm," where "commercial life has been kept at a minimum," but the bounty of the North Coast.

Having explored high cuisine in Europe, and treated as royalty in the best restaurants of New York City — keeping a table at the storied Four Seasons — Beard remarked that "those busy days on the Oregon Coast left their mark on me and no place on earth has done as much to influence my professional life."

Standing in front of the cottage — built in 1910, when Beard would've been just 7 — with the

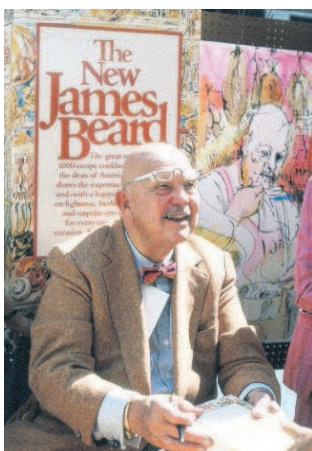
sun peaking through the trees and the sound of surf in the distance, it's not hard to see why.

Beard, along with his family and neighbors, had regular picnics on the beach. They swam, clammed and raked crabs from the tide pools. They explored the rivers and forest, caught crawfish and picked buckets full of berries. They returned home to host regular lunches and dinner parties — hundreds of them.

In Beard's autobiography, "Delights and Prejudices," memories are traced back through food. A momma's boy, Beard paid keen attention and found kinship in the reverent cooking of his stalwart, independent mother. Community gathered around their table, their fires on the beach. And the North Coast provided an abundance to share.

"(W)hat a treasure house of good food this part of the world was for us!" Beard wrote in "Delights and Prejudices." "The sandy soil was perfection for vegetables and small fruits; the evening dew and the temperate climate were good for growing and ripening. The nearby waters provided an inexhaustible supply of fish."

"The Pacific's greatest blessing, though, was the Dungeness crab, to my mind unequaled by anything in the shellfish world," Beard wrote. "I will match a good Dungeness against the best lobster in America and against the best langouste in Europe." (Langouste is a spiny lobster.)



James Andrew Beard



PHOTO BY THE MOUTH

James Beard's childhood cottage in Gearhart

Fresh, never frozen, boiled crab, Beard believed, if allowed to cool and eaten with "rich homemade mayonnaise, good bread and butter, and beer or a very light white wine" yields a meal "that the gods intended only for the pure in palate."

Salmon, too, was a staple in Gearhart, delivered the day it was caught. Beard and his mother were particularly fond of the cheeks. At the time an afterthought often tossed out with the heads, the fatty, rich cheeks would later become a delicacy as "scarce as white caviar and nearly as expensive." As for the rest of the salmon, it was prepared just about every which way: poached, baked, pickled, grilled and smoked. The Beards cooked it as natives had before them: over an open flame, splayed on forked branches of spirea that don't burn.

Beard rejoiced in sturgeon, crawfish, trout and "mussels by the ton." Oysters were sautéed in butter, sometimes lightly breaded, just cooked warm through. Razor clams were fried for breakfast, scalloped and souffléed. Of the "su-

perb" razors, which he wrote have "a rich flavor, somewhat akin to scallops, and a delicacy of texture that is different from any other clam I know," Beard declared he was "certain that if the razor clam existed in France, the recipes for them would be classic."

"It's no wonder we hardly ever touched meat," Beard wrote of his summers in Gearhart. "Save for picnics and occasional dinners, we existed almost entirely on the riches of the rivers and the sea."

There were fruits and vegetables, too, of course, like strawberries, huckleberries and blackberries, as well peas from a neighbor's garden that were "even better than the petits pois of France."

In "Delights and Prejudices" Beard includes the recipes of his stories, including those from his mother as well as other Gearhart residents, friends of the family. You'll find dishes like clam fritters, huckleberry cake, Mother's Clam Soufflé, Gravad Lax and Grammie Hamblet's Deviled Crab.

Beard's recipes are remarkable for their simplicity. Most are but

a paragraph long and include only a handful of ingredients. While some are surely more difficult than such brevity suggests, many appear quite approachable. Indeed, Beard's cooking was largely elemental, trusting that fresh, fine — and yes, local — ingredients would carry the day.

Occasionally, the Beards were invited to dine out, though his mother demurred, preferring her own fresh cooking to the "horrible stuff out of jars and cans" from nearby restaurants that she said left her with indigestion.

And while Beard continued to visit his beloved Gearhart and the North Coast almost until his death in 1985, only toward the end, in the early 80s, would he discover a restaurant that truly satisfied his taste, paying proper homage to the abundant bounty of the region. It was The Ark — later Nancy & Jimella's Cafe & Cocktails.

This is the first in an intermittent series on James Beard, exploring his history and influence in the region. **CV**