

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Hot Box BBQ presents a luscious, irresistible, inexpensive bite of pig

Review and photos by
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Some owners see their food carts like pit stops on the road toward restaurant-dom. But with brick-and-mortar can come a desire to expand offerings from the confines of a cart, where there's no room for flab.

But when you do one thing — slurpy, gooey, smoky, slow-cooked pork sandwiches — as well as they do at The Hot Box BBQ, why bother with anything else?

The yellow trailer landed in Astoria in March, turning the Reach Break Brewing patio, along with Sasquatch Sausages, into a bona-fide pod. But this isn't Hot Box's maiden voyage. The business, who've dubbed themselves "Modern American BBQ," began in Northern California before relocating to Portland.

The Portland cart, near the Southwest waterfront, was dubbed one of "Portland's Best New Food Carts" of 2015 by The Oregonian. Critic Michael Russell wondered if Hot Box's "might be the best pulled pork sandwich in PDX." The Willamette Week chimed in too, dubbing Hot Box's "some of the best cart-cooked pig shoulder in town."

When blessed with the opportunity to expand, rather than find four walls with a foundation, Hot Box opted to open an outpost in Astoria, and we should be thankful they did: You'll be hard-pressed to find a more luscious, irresistible bite on the North Coast for under \$10.

I'll refrain from going into detail on Reach Break or Sasquatch, for those are columns for another day. Suffice it to say that Hot Box is a lovely fit for the shared space. A block off the main drag, the patio (once home to the River People's



The Volcano

Farmer's Market) is rather quiet, placid on sunny days with space for families, mutts and games of corn-hole. When it rains, Reach Break's interior offers safe harbor. The only thing missing is a view of the water. But hey, we can't have it all. And anyway, the pork is damn near sensory overload by itself.

Hot Box's menu is finely distilled: a handful of sandwiches, two salads, two sides and maybe a special or two. All sandos are served on puffy, soft, toasted brioche buns. Each is available with the flagship pulled pork, chicken or smoked tofu.

Feeling a little health conscious on one of my trips — or, rather, overly aware of my waistline — I asked a dumb question, something

along the lines of: "How does the chicken compare to the pork?" The answer was right on the snout: "Everything's better with pork."

There was no need to question. Hot Box's sinews of pork shoulder are lustfully enchanted, full of juicy body and but a whisper of smoke.

There are four sandwich styles, each with regional foundations on which to place the pork tower. The Classic (\$8) is your familiar barbecue variety, with mayo, slaw and a tangy peach BBQ sauce that is

neither too sweet nor too spicy. The Maui Wowie (\$9) also drips with the peach sauce and adds a zing from pickled onion, but is colored mostly by pineapple.

While shaking a stick at neither, I preferred the Vietnam (\$9), with

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Kale salad

an almost Green-goddess-y, earthy cilantro aioli, plus pickled daikon, carrots, lettuce and mayo. Amidst such fatty decadence, the grounding of the cilantro aioli and ruffage made great sense. (Veggies and hints of earth aside, these stout, burger-sized sandwiches are caloric bangers that can slow your circulation to a crawl.)

The Vietnam made an end-run at the title of prized pig, but my favorite, just by a snout, was the Volcano (\$9). It balanced the sweet, slippery pang of jalapeño jelly, Sriracha mayo and lettuce greens. The tiebreaker on this salty, sweet, tangy, creamy, fatty mix was textural: salty shards of crispy, fried onion.

Besides fresh veg, nice buns and succulent pork, Hot Box's regionalized sandwiches are all honed and elevated with house-made sauces. Each featured aioli/mayo, and that creaminess offered a roundness that can't be overlooked.

Neither can the chicken, believe it or not. The thick, tender breast that juttied out beyond the buns was

THE HOT BOX BBQ

Rating: ★★★★★

1343 Duane St.
Astoria, Ore.
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707-223-2511

Hours: Friday & Saturday 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Monday, Thursday and Sunday 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Price: \$ – Sandwiches \$8 to \$9

Service: Quick

Vegetarian / Vegan Options:
Smoked tofu

Drinks: Bottled water, soda

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

a potent reminder of just how often we're served chicken that's been overcooked. At Hot Box it was absolutely perfect. (Right on the beak? Sorry.) It may not arouse the drooling, gluttonous desire of the pork, but neither will it necessitate a nap.

To ward of such listlessness — or to at least gain some veneer of making responsible choices — I recommend the kale salad above any of the sides and accouterments at Hot Box. (Sandwiches come with chips and \$2 more gets you coleslaw or potato salad.) Health aside, I legitimately enjoyed the kale salad most — again, something about the contrast of earth and the mildly acidic dressing against all that chubby swine.

One on occasion I tried the daily special, the OMGBLT (a BLT but with pork belly instead of bacon). The pork belly, too, was just fantastically prepared, with charred crust giving way to viscous rivers of salty, viscous fats. At another venue, it might've been cause for greater concern. But at Hot Box, the star — that tantalizing pork shoulder, with well-refined, regional dressings — casts a shadow over all the rest. It's bulletproof. **CW**