

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Port of Call's kitchen fails to deliver on menu's promises

Review and photos by
THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA
MOUTH@COASTWEEKEND.COM
FACEBOOK.COM/MOUTHOFTHECOLUMBIA

In April, The Daily Astorian reported changes at the Port of Call Bistro & Bar. The plan: pivot from unsavory watering hole to wholesome eatery.

Florida-based owner Marvin James Sawyer hired Taz Davis to manage the transition. Overhauling the menu, Davis dreamt of replacing the bar's sudsy reputation with artisanal cheese boards, steamer clams and cupcakes.

Davis also reshaped the interior, removing a stage to make room for more tables. Despite the adjustment, Port of Call still feels more night-club than all-ages eatery. Plenty of unused square feet remain, as does a shortage of natural light and a loft that, were it in Hollywood, would be reserved for VIPs.

Though the stage is gone, spotlights and steel scaffolding trace its footprint. The sound system remains (as do weekly open mic nights, jams and karaoke). During the day industrial fans whirl loudly against a jukebox whose genre is schizophrenic. TVs buzz, not with sports but viral videos of young people attempting stunts that either succeed or fail spectacularly. It's a weird, scattershot vibe — a nut-shot to go with your cheese plate.

A few months into the revamp, Davis and the Port of Call split. Upon Davis' departure some of the more delicate offerings (like crab cakes and steamer clams) went with him. But the majority of Davis' menu remains. Whether successors are prepared to execute its more atavistic reaches is another matter.

On my first trip, the Seared Ahi (\$11) was perplexingly recommended. "We just got the tuna in today," my server said. What was put before me, though, was one of the most visually unappealing dishes I've laid eyes on. The fish



ABOVE: Seared Ahi
LEFT: Baja Street Tacos
RIGHT: Red, White & Blue Burger

was a drab gray with sesame seeds mashed into the edges, drizzled with a slick, shiny brown, syrupy Teriyaki. It was sliced with no discernible method and cooked with even less.

With the Seared Ahi, the menu wrote a check the kitchen couldn't cash. It read thusly: "Sesame Crusted seared and teriyaki glazed served with wasabi and pickled spears." But there was no crust to speak of, no sear. (The reason: a cooking surface not nearly hot enough). It was, instead, almost as if the tuna were simmered, in places cooked through. Tasting as if it were cooked in bathwater, it was at once under- and overdone.

Against what the menu promised, the failures of the Ahi were executorial. The Baja Street Tacos (\$9) actually delivered a different preparation altogether. Rather than breaded and fried, as the menu marked, the fish I got was nakedly grilled. And what there was of the puny portion of whitefish — cod, I'm told — was barely enough to cobble together one legitimate taco, rather than fill the trio. And when I folded them, the corn

tortillas were so stale they split, the insides tumbling out.

Now, let's pause a moment to talk about accuracy between the menu and the kitchen: It's an absolute, baseline necessity. Restaurants must deliver exactly the ingredients and preparations the menu states. If substitutions are required or changes made to the process, that news must be shared with the customer before the order is finalized, and long before a plate is plopped down.

As I understand it, should the famed Michelin inspectors be presented with anything other than what the menu or server states, that restaurant is immediately removed from star-rating consideration.

In the context of Port of Call, which was never in contention for any Michelin star, whinging about accuracy might sound overly picky or even innocuous. But it's a big deal. Fortrightness matters. Once the circle of trust is broken, what's left? It's an exceedingly slippery slope that is at least disingenuous, at worst dangerous.

For what it's worth, my gut tells me the cook(s) and staff at Port of



PORT OF CALL BISTRO & BAR

Rating: ★

894 Commercial St., Astoria, Ore., 97103

503-325-4356

Hours: 11 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. Tuesday through Saturday; 9 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. Sunday; 3 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. Monday

Price: \$ - Entrées hover around \$10

Service: Doing their best in a difficult situation

Vegetarian / Vegan Options: Look elsewhere

Drinks: Full bar, soda

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

- ★ Poor
- ★★ Below average
- ★★★ Worth returning
- ★★★★ Very good
- ★★★★★ Excellent, best in region

maybe Port of Call is best left as a place that does regular ol' bar food (burgers and fries, chicken strips and onion rings, etc.). And maybe that's what it should've aimed for all along.

The Red, White and Blue Burger (\$13) — with bacon, blue cheese, lettuce, tomato and onion — was confidently and boldly presented, a steak knife pinning it all together. (Visually, the difference between the bold burger and the lonesome, desaturated Ahi was night and day.) But the plating was also a bit odd. Bacon twice the length of the burger criss-crossed in the center and flopped out like panting tongues. The bacon was properly cooked, crisp and juicy. It also afforded much-needed salt to the burger patty, which was hand-pressed but woefully under-seasoned. The blue cheese was quiet.

The plate came with a generous pile of hand-cut fries, though they, too, suffered without Davis' experience. Twice-fried, but without the requisite precision, they were all crispy, oily edge and no body. Unless you're going to do it with a stopwatch, twice-frying is best left to perfectionists. (I see you, Frite & Scoop.)

The Grilled Chicken (\$9) was another menu snafu. Said to come on toasted sourdough, mine arrived on an un-toasted burger bun. Described in the menu as a "seasoned grilled chicken breast" there was, again, no seasoning to speak of. Furthermore, the life had been cooked out of it.

In light of all the shortcomings and inaccuracies, Port of Call must recognize its limitations. There's nothing shameful about offering simple bar food. With a few easy tweaks, burgers (with some salt and pepper included in the patty-making process) and fries (dunked only once in the fryer), the standbys will be serviceable. Failing to deliver what the menu specifies, on the other hand, is unacceptable. **CW**

Call are doing their best, dealing with a difficult ownership situation that Davis' departure exacerbated. That said, if one is not sure how to achieve a dish, the answer isn't just to wing it — it is, rather, to take it off the menu. Customers shouldn't pay for practice.

After my first trip's disappointment, recalibration seemed in order. Perhaps the more aspirational aspects of Davis' menu — and perhaps his vision writ large — were out of reach. I thought: Heck,