

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## BYE BYE, BLACKBIRD

Review by

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After the check is paid and the last diners amble out, tables at Blackbird are re-set. Last Sunday, however, those refreshed place settings — the shining silverware, white cloth napkins, water glasses and so on — would no longer be necessary.

On Oct. 1, the Blackbird offered its final dinner service. And when the lights were flicked off, the candles extinguished and the stove left to cool, it was unclear if they'd ever be lit again.

A note on the door, hung a couple of weeks prior, told of the Manzanita restaurant's imminent end:

"It is with a delicate mix of sadness and relief we write to you, our most amazing guests," the note began. "We are indescribably gracious to you for giving us such a fond story to this chapter in our lives, and like all stories this chapter has an inevitable end. Moving on to the next is so tearfully bittersweet..."

Beyond the initial dismay, a few words jumped from the page: "relief," "bittersweet."

First, it ought to be underlined: Blackbird isn't closing for lack of business. Rather, owner/chef Lee Vance was burned out, not only from helming the kitchen, but training and failing to retain the staff necessary to help her run it.

At the same time, though, it seems Vance seeks not only to recharge her batteries, but find a new vehicle in which to use them. The note reads: "this chapter."

Regardless of whether a buyer emerges — and I certainly hope one does — the Blackbird will not be passed like a baton. There is no heir apparent. Regardless, Black-



Blackbird restaurant in Manzanita

bird, which opened Valentines Day 2014, was an extension of Vance. Should a buyer appear and the name remain, what emerges might be thought of as, at best, a re-boot. It won't be the same.

But any potential buyer should by all means crib from Vance's successes. Behind her refined, Italian-rooted cooking is a celebration of terrific local ingredients. Vance put to work the splendid abundance of her backyard (the Nehalem River Valley). (Purveyors listed on the menu included R-Evolution Gardens, King Fisher Farms, Lance's Farm Vittles, Zwiefel Eggs, Sea Level Bakery, Community Supported Fishery and so on.)

And while a buyer will have almost no choice but to concoct their own menu, they could feel confident offering it in a lovingly designed, carefully curated space. Over candle light, in the presence of stunning artwork, Blackbird was sleek without being pretentious or overbearing. (The warm, humble, exacting staff, too, deserve a share of credit for setting

the mood.) Altogether, Blackbird was one of the most romantic spots around.

It was always one of the first recommendations I'd give — especially for those in the neighborhood. While it could be confused with a Portland-y restaurant, Blackbird was sui generis, not chasing anything but rather fashioning its own. Blackbird offered a distinct and refined take on the place we call home. At times it felt like a glimpse into the future of North Coast dining.

Alas, Blackbird was also the only place in the region I know of that served bone marrow. Vance's offered vivid presentation: a criss-crossing pair of hulking bones that overwhelm a delicate glass tray. With luscious creeks of oily fats infused with onion and topped with briny accoutrements, the dish was both elegant and elemental. I felt like a bone-slurping caveman with fancy flatware.

The Green Garlic Spaetzle was a more hearty, heartening scene. An orgy of umami and creamy parmesan, replete with meaty

oyster mushrooms and a puffy and crisp green spinach and garlic pasta, I felt confident that with everyday access to such meat-y meat-alternatives I could turn vegetarian and love it.

Every bit as satisfying was the Blackbird stand-by: Bacon Wrapped Apricots stuffed with chevre and a Marcona almond. The pop-in-your-mouth bites comforted like a warm hug — salty, sweet, supple, charred, fatty, creamy and a nutty crunch. The skewers were served on a bed of arugula so fresh and spicy that you actually finish the arugula.

Regardless of the source — from the sear on the rockfish, to toast that's crusty on the outside, pillowy inside — Vance's executions were exquisite from the flagships on down. In her kitchen, there are no afterthoughts.

The dishes, though, will cause you to think. The Black Rock Fish — with warm frisée and spinach salad, white beans, sautéed cauliflower with touches of creme fraiche and bacon vinaigrette — delighted in subtle expan-

### BLACKBIRD

Rating: ★★★★★

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

sion. Bites that appeared simple unfurled slowly, quietly. You just had to listen.

Beyond the freshness and flawless preparation, one of the unmatched pleasures at Blackbird was the opportunity to tailor a meal matching your mood. You could do the usual thing: a starter and an entrée, or you could pass around plates meant to be shared. Or you could come for cocktails and dessert, or just sit at the bar (the bartending was nearly as involved as the kitchen).


Now, some of you may be jumping ahead, glancing at that star rating and wondering: Why is a restaurant that's closed getting reviewed?

Well, Nobel prizes can be awarded to work done in years and decades past, so why not a restaurant review? Really, it's about the record. Somewhat famously, Richard Fencsak, the original Mouth, during his tenure awarded five stars to a single restaurant: Seaview's The Depot.

We still talk about that review today. And if you ask me we'll be talking about Vance's Blackbird for years to come.

I never left feeling any less than elated. That came from not only the best ingredients from the place we call home, but the way Vance elevated them. Her lens was one of reflection and reverence, always delicious. In doing so, Blackbird, without fail, brought me into the present.

A Franz Kafka quote on Blackbird's menu captured the sensation. "So long as you have food in your mouth," it goes, "you have solved all questions for the time being."

At Blackbird that was absolutely true, and I'm grateful for it. 

PHOTOS BY JUSTIN BAILIE/BLACKBIRDMANZANITA.COM