

Salt Hotel & Pub sweats the details

Review and photos by
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A stroll through the Port of Ilwaco is transportive. Cross from solid ground to the bobbing docks and you might as well be in an alternate dimension. Gaze upon the resting boats, marvel at the wonder and mystery of life at sea. It is at once romantic and foreboding.

The view from Salt Hotel & Pub's second-floor perch is pretty good, too.

The pub, which opened late last year, marked the final phase of renovation to the two-story hotel. Built in 1972, it was purchased and given a makeover in 2015 by Laila Brown and Jules Orr. (Into the hotel's lobby they merged an existing business, Skookum Surf Co.) With hip amenities and design, Salt Hotel & Pub brings a modernity heretofore absent from the port's rough-hewn entrenchment.

This crossroads is amiable. Food and atmosphere that strike delightful balances between hearty and refined, forward and unpretentious, certainly greases the wheels of locals and tourists alike. One night while dining at the bar I met both a professional tuna fisherman and a TV documentarian from Portland. One was celebrating the end of a grueling season. The other was on assignment, filming such back-breaking labor.

Munching on a plate of deep-fried oysters and sipping a North Jetty IPA, the fisherman was celebrating a return to solid ground after a full month at sea. Over the summer, he and two boat mates — the captain and his dog — had reeled in some 50 to 60 tons of albacore. All-too-familiar with the tuna that sloshed around in the 60-foot boat's icy, salty hold, the fisherman couldn't have been less interested in eating any. "Yellow



ABOVE: Clam chowder BELOW: Elk sliders



tail, sure, I'd have that," he said. "But, right now, I'd rather eat sardines than albacore."

Me, I'm quite happy with the albacore.

Especially at Salt, where it comes from daily catches and processors just a few doors down. Salt's tuna has been caught and processed overnight, at the oldest. Which is to say it's quite fresh.

And that local, immediate sourcing led me to do something I rarely do: order Fish & Chips (\$16). (Salt also uses albacore in a Blackened Fish Taco appetizer and a Smoked Tuna Melt.)

A trio of tennis-ball-sized hunks, the fish steaks — and, with such thickness, "steaks" is a fair descriptor — were cleanly beer-battered, light and crunchy.

SALT HOTEL & PUB

Rating: ★★★★★

147 Howerton Ave.
Ilwaco, Washington 98624

360-642-7258

Hours: Noon to 8 p.m. Monday, Tuesday and Thursday; noon to 9 p.m. Friday; 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday; 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday

Price: \$\$ – most entrées in the teens

Service: Casual and fun

Vegetarian / Vegan Options: Worthwhile but limited

Drinks: Full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

The tuna was juicy, clean and tender, pure and essential. And while I often scoff at restaurants calling the fish in their fish-and-chips "sushi-grade," at Salt, where it's not overcooked, the label wouldn't be a stretch. (Though, to be sure: Salt doesn't use such nomenclature.) Oh, the fries are spot on, too — hand-cut, crispy and full of body.

Another dish I hardly ever order is clam chowder. Like fish-and-chips, chowder on the coast is often dumbed down, more begrudging tourist service than thoughtful inspiration.

Salt's chowder is another story, one that has as much in common with steamer clams or bisque as with what we normally think of as chowder.

Splitting the difference between a meal-worthy bowl and an appetizer-cup, Salt's Clam Chowder (\$12) is cooked to order. Rather

than thick mush, it's a simple marriage of pure, quality ingredients. Willapa Bay steam clams (complete with shell) stir with softened hunks of red potatoes, celery, supple bacon and corn in a sweet, heavy cream sauce that's flecked with rosemary. Rich, oceanic and earthy, it's whole food cooking that's marvelously satisfying.

Like salty, savory, sea-kissed donut holes, I also enjoyed the Jerk Spiced Clam Fritters (\$9), though they could've leaned further into the jerk seasoning. I appreciated the perky, house-made rémoulade. (The tartar with the fish-and-chips was house-made too, and livelier for it.)

Salt isn't all seafood; there are red meats and a penchant for pork belly. (It's also worth noting: the veggies, particularly the greens, are admirably fresh). The burgers looked stout and solid. One comes crowned with both pork belly and onion rings.

But on the specials board I noticed Elk Sliders (\$15) and couldn't say no. The flavorful, peppery patties were well-cooked and well-seasoned, then wrapped in salty, prosciutto and coated with a smear of sharp, dry goat cheese. Altogether, a wonderful mash-up of lean and luscious.

Indeed, there was hardly a misstep in my trips to Salt. Down to the toasting and buttering of the bread, they sweat the details. Elevated and comforting, the menu is enticing all the way through. In my trips, this made settling on what to order almost agonizing. The best approach may be to bring friends and share. In deciding, try to find out what's abundant. Is it the height of albacore season? Or are the Dungeness crabbers in full swing?

Whatever you end up with, though, take a moment before or after to wander the docks. You may come across the boat that caught your dinner. **CW**