MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Best new restaurants of 2017: Harding Trading Co., Avenue Q Pizza

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Cardamom panna cotta with blueberry compote at Harding Trading Co.

There are two ways to make coq au vin. At Harding Trading Co. in Cannon Beach, chef Nate Beckland prefers the long way.

All told, it takes about three days.

First, the coq — in this case chicken, which has become a customary replacement for the tougher, namesake rooster — is marinated overnight in red wine and herbs. On Day No. 2, after extensive drying, the chicken is seared in lardons, added to the simmering base of the stew, and left again to marinate overnight. On Day No. 3, it's ready to be finished.

Such drawn-out preparation settles and deepens the rich, complex flavors. Harding Trading Co.'s coq au vin is multitudinous, enveloping and transportive — the kind of thing one might eat in a castle, beside a raging fire and sudsy court.

At first Beckland wondered if he'd be able to keep such an involved dish on the menu; it's a ton of extra work. But he, with his wife, Kelly (the two met in culinary school), and the rest of the Harding crew, have devoted themselves to the refined processes of traditional French cooking.

Practically everything at Harding — from the salad dressings to the pastas to the desserts — is scratch-made by a close-knit staff. They do it all in the tightest of quarters. And here, size matters. In the closet-sized kitchen, storage is minimal. Stations must

Coq au vin with lemon-thyme spätzle at Harding Trading Co.

be popped up and packed away. Tools are limited, and in some cases sacrificed. All this adds up to even more work.

Yet nothing I've had at Harding has fallen short of exquisite. They just nail everything: the precise, paper-thin layers of the potato gratin, the lightly crisped edge of puffy, soft lemon-thyme spätzle, the balance of cardamom in the panna cotta.

While the restaurant's limited footprint may not do the kitchen staff any favors, the intimate dining room — its meticulously curated aesthetic fitting of a French farmhouse — is a warm, engaging and humbly enchanted setting. Every detail, from the interior design to the flatware to the cooking processes, is thoughtful and exacting.

Such careful, reverent culinary craft, makes Harding Trading Co. a Best New Restaurant of 2017.

And after a year that saw the demise of three of the region's very best restaurants — Nanci & Jimella's Cafe & Cocktails, Blackbird and the dinner service at Street 14 Cafe— it's heartening to add a newcomer to that top tier.

But Best New Restaurant recognition isn't limited to fine dining. The Mouth is an egalitarian who knows that joy can be found with a $5 bill.

Indeed, Seaside's Avenue Q Pizza is in many ways the opposite of Harding. It's spartan and spacious; design isn't an afterthought — it's not at thought at all.

Avenue Q's headspace is consumed wholly by the pursuit of the perfect pie. That starts with the crust, and it's the crust that sets Avenue Q's apart. The house-made dough is slow fermented. The process requires less yeast, takes longer to rise and yields a

Capocollo pizza at Avenue Q Pizza

lighter, airer crust. On top, in very thin layers, goes a basic tomato sauce, cheese — dry and wet mozzarella — and a topping or two. That's it.

This is pizza boiled down to its essence. Simple, vivid and supremely satisfying.

And that's all you'll find at Avenue Q. Owner Matt Kaffer (aka the "one-man pizzeria") doesn't monkey with salads, calzones, buffalo wings or anything else. Just perfect, classic Italian-style

pizza, available by the slice, or a whole pie. The minimalist ethic extends to price. Avenue Q's is a terrific deal, just $4 for a quarter of a pie.

Unlike many new restaurants that try to be all things to all people — especially those jostling for tourist dollars — Avenue Q excels with a singular, repetitive focus. It's pizza as meditation.

And like Harding Trading Co., Avenue Q arrives at nirvana by forgoing the shortcuts. CW