

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

The Old Fishtrap is a hearty dive bar with handmade character

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

There's no iceberg in it," she said of the salad.

The description had me swooning. It said everything I needed to know. It was as if the server were reading not only my mind, but my column.

You see, I've had it with dull iceberg lettuce salads. More than had it. You know the ones I mean. They come from a bag with a few inconsequential carrot shavings. They're essentially crisp water — a flavorless, nutrition-free vehicle for salad dressing. And the dressing usually sucks, too.

Besides being crummy, vapid voids, these retrograde iceberg "salads" hint at darker impulses: a lowest common denominator approach to dining.

So with the "no iceberg" declaration, I felt like I suddenly knew a lot about not only the salad, but The Old Fishtrap Seafood & Spirits itself.

A few more proud declarations from the server fill in the rest:

"If we can't make it from scratch, we don't serve it." "All the salad dressings are made in-house." "There's no food service stuff." "We get the fish from the fisherman and cut it here." "The beef is never frozen."

The ethic and cooking come from owner Carole Harley, who took over Chinook's decades-old,

dyed-in-the-wool dive bar almost three years ago.

From the dressings and sauces, to the hand-cut fries, to the soups, Harley makes just about everything from scratch besides the breads. There are fried things, sandwiches, a few specials and odds-and-ends, with an emphasis on seafood. The oysters come from nearby Willapa Bay, and the fish, I'm told, comes from what's available in the region. Harley knows some of the fishermen personally. Some veggies — like the salad greens — come from farms on the Peninsula.

Such specificity of vision sets the Fishtrap apart from the average dive, so many of which cater to locals in atmosphere while homogenizing the food by relying on bland, same-y national providers. The Fishtrap avoids that trap — it's a refuge for the neighborhood to drink, where eating is of equal local concern and character.

Which is why, I imagine, the Fishtrap remains competitive against the glossier but purveyor-centric newcomer across the street. Folks regularly pop in, not for drinks but to pick up boxes of takeout. (Locals use the side door.)

With little else around before Long Beach, Chinook feels like a hard-working, big-eating, big-drinking, blue-collar neighborhood, and the Fishtrap's menu is stacked accordingly.

I began with the Oyster Po' Boy (\$11.95), and I'm so happy



Dungeness crab cakes



Trap burger



Oyster Po' Boy

I did. You see, the last Oyster Po' Boy I had (I was away from the coast) left a funky taste in my mouth that needed erasing. Those oysters were dubious, overcooked and rubbery.

Not at the Fishtrap. Here they were cooked exquisitely. The breading was thin and crispy, the oysters inside had a melty, luscious body. With tomatoes and a lightly sweet, dijon-winking cabbage slaw, the hoagie was teeming yet carefully assembled; most everything remained within the confines of the perfectly toasted bread. It was slurpy to the last bite, just messy enough. And, really, if you're not licking your fingers with a po' boy, something's gone wrong.

As advertised, the Trap Burger (\$10.95) was indeed a "monster," with a hand-pressed patty somewhere around a 1/3 pound, maybe

heavier. On a square ciabatta bun it had the accoutrements to match. It's big, stout and meaty. As they say: You are what you eat. And the Trap Burger matches the guys around Chinook who order it.

A bit more refined, the Dungeness Crab Cakes (\$18.95) were hardly dainty. They were filled with sinewy strings of our abundant crustacean and a few green onions, light on breadly filler. The house-made tartar — like the rest of the salad dressings and sauces — was a bit livelier than the stuff you normally get out of a bottle.

The soup, a Cream of Broccoli, wasn't shy about incorporating actually broccoli flavor, though I could've gone for more chunks of stems and heads.

Fish at the Fishtrap changes based on availability. During my trips it was cod. (I'm guessing that when the season is on, tuna joins

THE OLD FISHTRAP SEAFOOD & SPIRITS

Rating: ★★☆☆

779 U.S. Highway 101
Chinook, Washington 98614
360-777-8296

Hours: 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. every-day

Price: \$ — Most entrées hover around \$10

Service: Local-centric, saucy, proud

Vegetarian / Vegan Options:
A portobello burger, fries, salad

Drinks: Full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

the fray.) It's regularly available in fish and chips, though I opted for the Fish Sandwich special. The three panko'd, almost wallet-sized filets were perhaps the dullest dish I had at the Fishtrap. This was, however, totally in line with the value. This wasn't some overpriced hoodwink, just plain ol' cod, priced as such.

Finally, there's that salad, the one without iceberg. Built on a bed of mixed greens from a nearby farm, the dish turned heads on the way to my table. Two people asked about it. They were taken, no doubt by the vivid colors: slashes of red and yellow bell peppers against the deep greens, topped with long, spaghetti-like shreds of cucumber. It was fresh, wholesome and thoughtful.

Now, the salad wasn't really the star — that would be the oysters or crab cakes — and it wasn't reinventing the wheel. But, then again, it wasn't supposed to. Thanks to Harley's ethic, the Fishtrap knows exactly what it wants to be: a hearty, comforting local bar where the food has an equally distinct, handmade character. A home away from home. **CW**