

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Thoughtful sips, nibbles at MacGregor's Whiskey Bar

Review and photos by  
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For a time I drank Wild Turkey. I drank Wild Turkey because Hunter S. Thompson drank Wild Turkey. (Thompson also guzzled Chivas Regal, Bloody Marys, Heineken and just about anything else he could get his twisted mitts on.)

With a charitable eye, you might call my mimicry romantic, an homage of sorts. But, truthfully, I was hoping to conjure or syphon some of that gonzo mojo.

While Thompson is remembered as perhaps the most voracious and insatiable of literary users, the tale is hardly uncommon; the list of sudsy, literary lions is long: Twain, Joyce, Faulkner, just to name a few.

Which bring us to MacGregor's Whiskey Bar.

Owner Chip MacGregor is a writer who wound up in New York, working for a publishing house. In the mid-2000s Chip returned to the Northwest and launched MacGregor Literary, his own agency.

Then came the tornado.

In October 2016, winds spun up from the ocean and ripped through downtown Manzanita. Among the damaged was Vino. Rather than sign a lease and remodel, Vino called it a day. In that tiny space, Chip saw an opportunity to take his passion public. With a redesigned interior, MacGregor's Whiskey Bar opened in the early summer of 2017.

Like Vino, MacGregor's is the size of a shoebox, and it's hard to imagine it being as effective any other way. (Well, OK: They could dim the lighting.) The bar, maybe four seats long, takes up nearly a third of

the interior. It can be cramped, but limiting capacity is integral to the staff's engagement, which during my trips was game and sincere.

And really, how does a novice navigate 150-plus whiskeys without a guide, anyway? Sure, you might have a favorite. And that's fine. Order away. (The cocktails, it should be mentioned, are excellent, too.) But that would skip out on the bar's most essential service.

Rather, turn to MacGregor's thoughtful and thematic flights (most of which cost around \$24 for three one-ounce pours). Most revolve around specific locales (Scotland, Japan, Oregon, etc.), styles (scotch, bourbon, rye, etc.) or bring them together for contrast. Then there's the Flight of Fancy, where a server works with you to fashion a custom tasting. On a slow January evening, with Chip as Sherpa, I leaned in.

He probed my tastes to build a profile. I told him I preferred bourbon and rattled off a few I liked. I wanted each taste to be something I'd never had before.

Chip went to work. He uncorked bottles and offered smells, little tastes and stories. We settled first on Michter's, which Chip said was his favorite bourbon at the bar. Next was Noah's Mill. I was attracted by Chip's description: family owned, non-corporate and very hard to get. The story of Old Forrester 1920 Prohibition Style Bourbon sucked me in, too — made strong, the way bootleggers did when alcohol was outlawed. (Price was not discussed during construction of the flight. It ended up at \$31.)

With glasses seated in a whiskey barrel stave, the three neat (aka iceless) pours were presented with the bottles. The arrangement helps you remem-



Chip MacGregor presents the Flight of Fancy at MacGregor's Whiskey Bar.

ber which golden brown liquor is which. More than just a social media-friendly photo-op, the labels offer insight. I noticed, for instance, that the family-run Noah's Mill was every bit as potent (around 57-percent alcohol) as the Old Forrester Prohibition Style. But where the Old Forrester struck with the force of a clenched fist, acerbic and radiating heat, Noah's Mill was comparatively gentle, unfurling with an herbal tingle. Chip's favorite, the Michter's, was robust, round, sweet and inviting — popular for all the right reasons.

I asked Chip what specifically made the Michter's his favorite. He gushed a bit about the sweetness, the caramel, the vanilla, but said he wasn't exactly sure. Sometimes you just know. And that some mystery remains, I think, is part of the allure.

But so, too, is contemplating, comparing and contrasting characteristics where distinction lies in the details. Tasting with purpose makes you present. (The alcohol helps, too.) Discerning requires focusing on what's before you, embodying and imbibing the moment. States like these are among the greatest joys of dining.

Eating at MacGregor's bears much in common with the drinking. The nibbles are as thoughtful as the sips.

As with Vino, MacGregor's kitchen is not much bigger than a closet. And so MacGregor's, like Vino, offers mostly premade bites from quality purveyors. The heart of the eats are handsomely arranged boards: cheese, pâté, charcuterie and so on. The contents of the boards are like cousins of the whiskies: artisanal, craft products where time is an essential part of the process. Like whiskies, charcuterie, cheese and pickled things are aged, vast and occasionally mysterious.

Chip called the Pâté Board (\$15) the best thing on the menu. It featured three pâtés from Portland's Olympic Provisions: green peppercorn and wine, rustic pork rillettes and a melange of pheasant, duck and rosemary, plus baguette, crackers, whole-grain dijon mustard and cornichons (tiny pickled cucumbers). I enjoyed the deep richness of the pheasant-duck pâté and the texture of the unpressed, traditional pork rillettes. The addition of something sweet and fruity — jam, say — could make the pâté board multitudinous.

### MacGREGOR'S WHISKEY BAR

Rating: ★★☆☆

387 Laneda Ave.  
Manzanita, Ore. 97130

503-368-2447

Hours: 4-10 p.m.

Price: \$\$ – One could easily rack up a righteous tab

Vegetarian / Vegan Options:  
Nibbles like cheese, nuts, olives

Drinks: They have beer, plus other spirits, and delicate, delightful cocktails

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

The more familiar Charcuterie Board (\$17) offered less contemplation, though a wider breadth of flavor with both meats and cheeses, including Olli fennel pollen salami, a slightly dry Creminelli Milano prosciutto, and Midnight Moon aged gouda.

MacGregor's menu includes other dainty, distinct and flavor-forward snacks, like olives, almonds and a pretzel with cheese dip. There's a small section of the menu titled "Hearty" that isn't quite. At least the Lobster Bisque (\$11) wasn't. It was, though, a gluttonous orgy of lobster-flecked butters and creams that made for the most enveloping, coating palate cleanser. While not overly filling, it was cozier than a warm bed.

MacGregor's isn't really a place to have dinner, but it is a discerning sensory experience rarely found on the coast. Their veritable quandary of sips and nibbles nourishes the mind every bit as much as the taste buds, if not more so. Indeed, MacGregor's is a bar that rewards critical thinking.

And, as a writer, that makes a whole lot of sense. 