

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review



BBQ combination (clockwise from top left): coleslaw, baby back ribs, tri-tip, baked beans



The Ship Wreck: tri-tip with grilled onions, bell peppers, mushrooms, melted Swiss and mozzarella cheese

## GRAY WHALE BBQ & GRILL

**Rating:** ★★

280 S. Roosevelt Drive  
Seaside, Ore. 97138

503-717-5068

**Hours:** Noon to 7 p.m.-ish  
Sunday, 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.-ish  
Tuesday through Saturday

**Price:** \$\$ – The flagship BBQ meats are a bit spendy

**Service:** Chatty, well-intentioned, personable

**Vegetarian / Vegan Options:**  
It's BBQ

**Drinks:** Beer, wine, soda, root beer floats

### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

## At Gray Whale BBQ & Grill, stick to tender, smoky meats

Review and photos by

THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

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Smoke is the lifeblood of Seaside's Gray Whale BBQ & Grill. You get a noseful as soon as you open the door. After dining, it sticks around.

Some 30 minutes or maybe even an hour later, the smoky vapors maintained their residence somewhere between my tongue and nose. I can't recall any other food's flavor — or is it essence? — lingering in such a tangible way.

Which is fitting, I suppose, because BBQ, cooked slow and low, is the product of time.

Where much of BBQ culture adheres almost religiously to regional recipes and practices, the Gray Whale cherry-picks in a way some southerners might find heretical.

For the pulled pork and tri-tip, Gray Whale mashes up East and Central Texan traditions, using hickory wood to generate smoke (as they do in East Texas) but forgoing the sweet, tomato-based sauce. Instead, Gray Whale employs a dry rub (as they do in Central Texas, but

where pecan or oak are the preferred woods).

Gray Whale's pulled pork is said to use a Memphis-style rub (which is sweet, spicy and peppery), but I noticed little influencing the tender, juicy pork butt besides smoke. Even the blackened edge pieces were at most gingerly influenced.

Same goes for the tri-tip. The crust was replete with smoky char, the insides simple, lean, roast beef-like. Against pulled pork and ribs — not to mention brisket, a BBQ standby not found at Gray Whale — the tri-tip was lean, almost responsible by comparison.

Beneath the caramelized crust (aka the "bark") of the ribs, the flesh and gooey fats pulled clean from the bone. Midway through the quarter rack, though, the exceptionally sweet, honey and sugar-heavy glaze outlasted my sweet tooth.

While I would dial down the sugars on the ribs, there's room for some fluffing of the pulled pork. An essential, fatty, textural experience by its lonesome, pulled pork takes flavors so well.

And while cooking in the sauces deepens and settles the flavors, you can add your own after the fact. The

Gray Whale offers two squeeze-bottle solutions: Whale and Hickory sauces.

On both of my trips, the Seaside restaurant was out of their namesake sauce, described on the menu as "mild, savory and sweet." Add the word "tang" and you could say the same about the Hickory sauce. I found the "hot" variety to be mild, offering but a faint tongue tingle.

I pine, meanwhile, for South Carolina's mustard sauce and the vinegar and hot-sauce base of Eastern North Carolina's.

I suppose this is as good a time as any to mention: BBQ joints are in regional decline. After a decade in Astoria, Rollin' Thunder BBQ closed in December. About a year ago, the exceptional Mericle's Epic Eats vanished from Ilwaco. That leaves Gray Whale as the sole traditional BBQ joint, as far as I can tell.

The Whale offers three flagship meats in a handful of configurations (including for take-out by the pound). Combination plates are ideal for sampling. \$17.99 gets you meats and two sides. It's a substantial amount of food but stops short of overwhelming. In other words: It's not exactly cheap. With these

kinds of portions you might not get the meat sweats unless you really try. But certainly your circulation will seem to slow and you will consider a nap.

For groups there are eat-with-your-hands-inspiring platters served atop a garbage can lid. The Two Person (\$35) includes three meats, four sides. Prices and portions rise accordingly.

Sides include the requisite baked beans and coleslaw as well as mashed potatoes, macaroni salad, fries, grilled veggies and a few more.

With a combo of tri-tip and ribs, I had slaw and baked beans. I appreciated the Dijon in the slaw's dressing wasn't shy, and that the cabbage wasn't shredded. With more icy body, tang and cool creams, it was an ideal palate reset. But as the beans were somewhat sweet and the ribs very much so, the slaw became my source of much-needed salt on the platter. Not much seems to make it into the meats.

The flagship meats are available in sandwiches, too. The weighty, cheesesteak-inspired Ship Wreck (\$10.50) — with oodles of gooey

mozzarella and Swiss gluing together grilled mushrooms, bell peppers and nicely caramelized onions over a bed of tri-tip — is simple, greasy and satisfying. And while the name of the Naked Pork (\$11.50) makes no bones about it's unadorned, meat-and-bread-y-ness, perhaps a few kind words to a server could procure some pickles, onions and Hickory sauce to make an honest sandwich out of the thing.

The Gray Whale has burgers, too, but the pre-made patties aren't afforded an iota of the focus of the BBQ. This is partly by design: They're cheap. A plain burger (\$5.95) with choice of a side like, say, the mashed potatoes — with skins included and lumpy in all the right ways — is a fine value proposition.

Avoid, however, the thin and gummy clam chowder. A lake of butter, it's a needless addition to the menu. So, too, are the fish-and-chips, the fried shrimp and clams. Leave them for the tourists.

Rather: Stick to those tender, exceedingly smoky BBQ'd meats. 