

BEST BURGER, BEST CHEF (MICHAEL LALEWICZ), BEST CLAM CHOWDER, BEST FINE DINING

MIGHTY FINE DINING AT
THE DEPOT

SEAVIEW

BEST BURGER**Runner-up:** Portway Tavern
Honorable Mention:
Fort George Brewery**BEST CHEF****Runner-up:** Alec Evans,
Astoria Coffee House & Bistro
Honorable mention:
Dan Brownson, Carruthers**BEST CLAM CHOWDER****Runners-up:** Buoy Beer Co.
Honorable mention:
Fort George Brewery**BEST FINE DINING****Runner up:** Carruthers
Honorable mention:
T Paul's Supper Club

By PATRICK WEBB

To watch Michael Lalewicz in his kitchen is to watch a master at his art. The chef-owner of The Depot Restaurant has a tiny kitchen visible from the dining area. From their tables, guests can delight in the aroma as their meals are prepared.

Nancy
Gorshe

On March 5, he and his partner Nancy Gorshe will mark 15 years running the restaurant in an unassuming building in Seaview on the southern end of the Long Beach Peninsula. This year Coast Weekend readers voted it the best fine dining establishment, as well as naming Lalewicz the region's best chef. Just like last year, The Depot won for best clam chowder and hamburgers. (It placed second for catering.)

Mention of fine dining may conjure up big-city images of white tablecloths, fancy glassware and elaborate table settings. But Lalewicz said The Depot isn't big enough. "What we don't have, we make up for with service and flavor," he said. "You have to know your guests and know what they want."

The menu

The elaborate menu begins with a choice of seven small-plate dishes which include Willapa Bay oysters with roasted garlic aioli dipping sauce or Peruvian mango sea scallops topped with pickled red onions.

Salads or two soups, Gazpacho Seville or chowder, can also be enjoyed before an entrée. The chowder features chopped razor clams, with garlic and leeks, potatoes that are cooked separately, plus fresh steamer clams in the shell that are added later.

Six meat selections include rack of lamb in a sauce verde, duck Marseille (with a cherry and Pinot Noir reduction), bacon-wrapped quail and pork braised in Southern Comfort barbecue sauce. Oysters, prawns, clams and a catch-of-the-day are on the seafood menu. Daily dessert specials follow.

Wednesdays are burger nights, ostensibly for locals during the non-summer season. Burger options are so complex that wait staff fill out a check-off card for each one. They can feature beef, buffalo, a Portobello mushroom or a fried oyster. There are 14 topping options — four cheeses, cheddar, blue, pepper jack or Swiss, plus lettuce, tomato, red onion, pickles, jalapeño, pineapple, avocado, sautéed mushrooms, bacon and a fried egg.

The restaurant hosts nine themed wine dinners a year. For example, the annual November event celebrating Lewis and Clark features game meats. The next is Friday, March 2, and showcases six wines from The Basel Cellars in Walla Walla, Washington, including one called The Depot Red. Reservations are required.

Origin story

Lalewicz grew up in Detroit, first working in an Italian restaurant where everything was made from scratch. He learned about preparing game on family hunting and fishing trips. Working as a caterer in the Washington, D.C., and Virginia-Maryland area, broadened his knowledge of



PATRICK WEBB PHOTOS

Executive chef Michael Lalewicz temporarily sets a pan ablaze while cooking in his kitchen at The Depot in Seaview, Washington. In the 2018 Readers Choice awards, he was named best chef and the restaurant won for best fine dining, as well as two-other first-place awards.

seafood.

Gorshe has had a 30-year career in health care consulting. She continues to draw on her expertise as chairman of the board of the Ocean Beach Hospital commissioners and active service on the board of directors of the Washington State Hospitals Association.

Back in 1986, when she was the lobbyist for the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, she met Lalewicz when he catered her event.

They moved to Portland two years later. His training at the Western Culinary Institute and the chance to travel around Europe and the U.S. for 20 years, sampling and studying the best restaurants, led to a desire to get back to cooking.

Fifteen years have passed in Seaview, and the couple say their only regrets are much less travel and many missed family events because they've been working weekends and holidays.

'Our customers are friends'

Gorshe suggested that the reason patrons like The Depot is the combination of cooking and service. People can enjoy a quiet romantic evening or a group gathering.

"Michael makes everything from scratch, and he creates unusually complex, wonderful dishes," she said. "You are

going to be surprised by the flavors in your mouth — one person who came here said, 'It's like a party in your mouth.'

"It's wonderful to watch their surprise from the complex textures, the colors and multiple tastes, like crunch and smooth."

When Lalewicz is away, his sous chef, Jamie Gisby, is in charge. The third member of the cooking team is Roger Morey, chef de partie.

"Other places have a pastry guy and a hot line and a cold line," Lalewicz said. "Here it's just us, and we make all the deserts."

Don Porter, serves as front of house manager and trains staff. Lead waitress is Ashley Wassmer, who began busing Depot tables when she was in high school.

As well as knowledge of the menu, Gorshe said they are taught to listen to customers.

"We really emphasize service — it's their night," she said. "Our customers are our friends, and then we have strangers, and our staff's skill is to read them. If they want to be alone, we leave them alone for a quiet romantic evening."

"We like to make people comfortable and special — and read their needs so they have a wonderful dining experience."

The Depot is located at 208 38th Place, Seaview, Washington. Call 360-642-7880 for reservations.

AND
LIBERTY
FOR ALL

ASTORIA

BEST LIVE THEATER**Runner-up:** Astor Street Opry Co., Astoria
Honorable mention: Coaster Theatre Playhouse, Cannon Beach**BEST MUSIC VENUE****Runner-up:** Pickled Fish, Long Beach
Honorable mention: Fort George Brewery, Astoria

By PATRICK WEBB

It is the jewel in the crown of downtown Astoria.

The Liberty Theatre forms the centerpiece of the renaissance of a community that has changed its appearance and outlook in the last 20 years.

Coast Weekend readers have voted it the best music venue on the North Coast — an award it has won before — and this year as the best theater.

Jennifer
Crockett

The brace of accolades delighted Jennifer Crockett, who has spent the last year and a half as executive director. Her joy in learning of such community support for the facility launched her into an enthusiastic listing of what is to come next.

The Liberty has been the core venue for the expanding Astoria Musical Festival, which will see its 16th year in June. But Crockett has been working to make it a year-round venue for music.

Last month, the Liberty hosted two Music Festival favorites, cellist Sergey Antonov and pianist Ilya Kazantsev, for a Russian New Year performance. The 2017-18 season saw the debut of a nine-concert classical music series.

When the Schubert Ensemble of London offered to perform at the Liberty, newspaper executive Steve Forrester, who led the campaign to restore the building, teamed with local chamber music host Ray Lund to create something new.

"We decided to use that as a springboard to a larger classical series," Forrester said.

The four remaining dates for classical shows are a matinee Feb. 17 and evening shows March 16, April 26 and May 25. For details, see libertyastoria.org.

More intimate than a club

Groups that play at the Liberty are encouraged to lead music workshops at Astoria High School, a tradition Crockett is hoping to broaden to other districts.

The homegrown North Coast Symphonic Band and the visiting U.S. Air Force Jazz Band are among those that have graced the Liberty's stage. She has worked to book other visiting musical groups with an Oregon and Washington following.

"It's a beautiful space and you get a different experience to a club," she said. "It's a lot more intimate than in a club where everybody is talking and you have a hard time connecting with the band."

Crockett is a clarinetist who is married to a violinist, so her interest goes way beyond her full-time job of the day-to-day running of the theater. Her mother and grandmother were musical and a field trip to the Chicago Symphony's "Nutmcracker" helped spark a life-long interest in the arts.

In the last year, 14,900 people attended 76 events at the Liberty; surveys reveal about three out of four were locals. Organizers of 29 private events also rented the theater.

Crockett believes two significant projects will increase those numbers.

Grants will pay for a new sound system. Incredibly, and possibly unknown to many patrons, the Liberty has had to rent a sound system for every visiting show. That will end.

"After we have our own system, every show will sound the same and every show will be great — wherever you sit in the theater," Crockett said. "That will help with the variety of shows we can bring in because a lot of people turn us down."

'Now we get the guts'

Next, a capital campaign is planned to



COLIN MURPHEY PHOTO

The Liberty Theatre was restored beginning in 1992 and now serves as a centerpiece of downtown Astoria.

install rigging and lighting above the stage to add flexibility to staging.

"We will be able to do theater, opera, ballet and all sorts of stuff," she said.

The campaign to raise those funds begins this fall. "It's exciting. It will increase the amount of theater exponentially. We have turned down touring theater and opera because we could not meet their needs."

As an example, the creative BodyVox dance troupe from Portland returned for the fourth time to entertain an audience with a Halloween-themed show last October, "but it was only 20 percent of their show," Crockett said.

She credits Larry Bryant, the Liberty's resident technical jack-of-all-trades, with preparing the way for this important change. "He is kind of the unsung hero of the Liberty Theatre," she said.

During the major renovation, which took place in phases spanning well over a dozen years, she said Bryant convinced restoration coordinators to ensure that the stage was topped by weight-bearing steel beams. A better heating and ventilation system was installed, but at his urging it was placed so it did not occupy important space above the stage.

Crockett believes patrons will support this next enhancement. "We have all the framework there, now we get the guts."

'Let's blow the doors off!'

Despite the lack of facilities for overhead stage lighting or elaborate rigging for scenery, the Liberty has hosted many performances, including the annual summer visit of the Missoula Children's Theatre during

which a couple of college actors recruit a cast of local children and spend one week rehearsing and staging a play.

Other acting happens quarterly in the McTavish Room, the beautifully appointed ballroom on the same level as the balcony.

"Our director, Sen Incavo, finds scripts that he likes," Crockett explained. Gender topics or scripts addressing rape and other serious issues have drawn audiences who appreciate thought-provoking evenings in a readers theater format. "We try to pick scripts that will start conversations," she said. "He was unsure about how far to push the envelope and I said, 'Let's blow the doors off!'"

"People like it, ticket sales are up and we receive donations towards readers theater."

The Astoria School of Ballet has been based there since 2008; other regular performers include the Oregon Ballet Theatre. The theater has also hosted Astoria Pride galas.

As the annual FisherPoets Gathering expanded and its organizers sought bigger venues for the February showcase, the Liberty was a natural. Crockett admits she didn't expect a huge audience the first year, but was delighted to have to quickly open up more seats as crowds filed in. This month, a second night has been added.

"I like events that offer a mix, and I like it when people come in and they say they have never been in here before," she said. "We are trying to get everybody involved. It is the community's theater — we want to be *the* theater of the community."

The Liberty Theatre is located at 1203 Commercial, Astoria.