

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

A critic's look at the 2017 Readers' Choice Awards

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Depending on your vantage, here comes either the wet blanket or voice of reason as I weigh in on the 2017 Readers' Choice Awards, published last week.

First, though, let me thank everyone who voted. The results are illuminating.

It's also important, I think, to consider how demographics may skew the awards: Astoria has the largest population, so its businesses are likely to garner more votes.

To that I say two things: Next year, smaller towns like Cannon Beach and Seaside need to rock the vote. Second: Dine across the region. Mix it up. Exploring is a reward in itself!

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Best Asian Food

1. Nisa's Thai Kitchen
2. Himani Indian Cuisine
3. Golden Star Restaurant

In a perfect world, each of the regional cuisines recognized above would duke it out in their respective category (e.g., Best Thai, Best Indian, etc.). But this list is also noteworthy for a cuisine it lacks: Japanese. In particular, sushi on the North Coast can leave you wanting.

That said, while it's seasonal and limited, the Roll & Bowl cart deserves recognition. I can't wait until it's back alongside the farmer's markets. I miss those deep, developing, slurpy ramen bowls and the sushi that wraps up our freshest local bounty.

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Best Bar

1. Reach Break Brewing
2. Astoria Coffee House & Bistro
3. Carruthers

Kudos to Reach Break. Their ever-rotating small batches and focus on the beers less trafficked (i.e., not just a bunch of IPAs) have built a devout following in relatively short order. Reach Break strikes me as something like your brewer's favorite beer.

But awarding Reach Break "Best Bar" feels like a mix-up. In my reading, a "Best Bar" has an atmosphere every bit as intoxicating as what's in the glass. Aesthetically, Reach Break's interior is a void. A sterile garage with cold, flat surfaces that reflect noise and blaring halogen lights, it doesn't even rise to "man cave" status. A little sprucing up would go a long way. (New neighbor Reveille Ciderworks shows how. In two words: mood lighting.) Were we voting on "Best Brewery," "Best Patio" or "Best Pod," I'd have no problem.

Beyond all that, in my book, any bar that closes at 9 p.m. on a Saturday is immediately removed from Best Bar consideration. But don't get it twisted: I'm a big Reach Break fan.

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Best Bartender

Jeany Birdeno (Merry Time Bar and Grill)

This is so well deserved. Jeany Birdeno is Wonder Woman. She's efficient, ebullient, charming, totally unflappable and everywhere at once. But let us remember: A plaque or trophy is not how you reward a bartender. Thank Jeany by tipping generously!

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COLIN MURPHEY PHOTO

Jeany Birdeno, pouring a drink at the Merry Time Bar and Grill in Astoria, won Best Bartender — and deservedly so.

Best Burger

1. The Depot Restaurant
2. Portway Tavern
3. Fort George Brewery

Speaking of the Merry Time, I can't believe their stout, juicy, aggressively well-seasoned burger didn't make this list. Especially at happy hour rates, it's a steal.

And when it comes to burgers, I've been working my way toward a comprehensive roundup. As such, I'd love to hear about your favorites. Pitch me on who's got the best burger at mouth@coastweekend.com.

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Best Chef

1. Michael Lalewicz (The Depot Restaurant)
2. Alec Evans (Astoria Coffee House & Bistro)
3. Dan Brownson (Carruthers)

After a brief disruption (edged out last year by Street 14's Andrew Catalano) Michael Lalewicz returns to his trusty, familiar spot as Best Chef.

I have no intention of arguing, suffice to say that I hope to see some women on the list soon. Before she decided to close Blackbird, Lee Vance would've been a shoe-in. Still, there are other strong candidates, like The Irish Table's Crystal Corbin.

But, by and large, the vast majority of North Coast restaurants are

run by male chefs. It's beyond time for that to change.

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Best Fine Dining

1. The Depot Restaurant
2. Carruthers
3. T Paul's Supper Club

Once again it's hard to argue with The Depot's taking the top honor here. Over the years they've been as deserving and indomitable as Meryl Streep.

Beyond exquisite food and an affecting atmosphere, service is a significant component of "fine dining." At The Depot, service is impeccable, almost preternatural: They seem to know what you need before you even know it yourself.

And with no shots at any of the others honored in the Fine Dining category, we should talk a bit more about demographics. That's the only way I can fathom that no Cannon Beach restaurants cracked the top three. A magnet for affluent residents and tourists alike, Cannon Beach is the North Coast's epicenter of fine dining. The potential nominees are legion, including the Stephanie Inn, Newman's at 988, The Irish Table, The Bistro, Cast-away's and so on.

You could make a similar case for Best Chef. Over at least the last four years, winning teams at Iron

Chef Goes Coastal have included a Cannon Beach chef. (The 2017 winning team was made up of John Sowa, from Cannon Beach's Sweet Basil, and Jeff Martin of Silver Salmon Grille in Astoria.)

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Best Clam Chowder

1. The Depot Restaurant
2. Buoy Beer Co.
3. Fort George Brewery

Best Desserts

1. Frite & Scoop
2. The Depot
3. T Paul's Supper Club

I want to give quick shout-outs to some of my personal favorites. For Best Clam Chowder (which ought to be, simply, Best Chowder), Buttercup and Salt Pub's cooked-to-order varieties are essential. So, too, is Castaway's in Cannon Beach: sinfully creamy, a little spicy and replete with hunks of delectable salmon. As for dessert, Buttercup's ice creams with cone pairings, sorbets and semifreddos, are always worth a look as Julie Barker comes up with refreshing new confections every month.

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Best Fish and Chips

1. The Bow Picker
2. Buoy Beer, Co.
3. Clemente's

I've said it before and I'll say it again: Seaside's Grisly Tuna has a terrific, snappy crust. Plus, it's quick, reasonably priced and credit card-friendly. On the upper end, the halibut at Public Coast Brewing costs nearly an arm and a leg at \$22.95, but the quality is apparent.

I'm also considering regional roundups on fish and chips and chowder, too. Send me your faves: mouth@coastweekend.com.

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Best Pizza

1. Fort George Brewery
2. Fultano's Pizza
3. Baked Alaska

The wood-fired oven upstairs at Fort George makes a pie to be reckoned with. But Seaside's Avenue Q Pizza, with slow-fermented dough and monkish, puritanical devotion, is pure and simple pizza nirvana that's ridiculously affordable to boot. 