

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

February's flurry of food festivals

Story by

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Despite a few glints of spring's approach, February can be a trying time 'round these parts. We're cold, wet, cooped up and over it.

So I give mighty thanks to February's flurry of festivals — among them Astoria's Festival of Dark Arts and FisherPoets Gathering, and Seaside's Fiery Foods Festival — without which I might've lost my mind.

These events are, in many ways, a response to February: They gather context, meaning and necessity from its shivering, wet, oft-barren darkness.

At Fort George Brewery, February is Stout Month. Their proclamation: "The shortest and darkest month is the perfect time to showcase the immense variety hidden within this style of beer." The culmination of Stout Month is the Festival of Dark Arts, a day-long carnival with blackened suds flowing from some 65-plus kegs. It's a bright, lively party when we need it most.

Similarly, holding the Fiery Foods Festival in February makes perfect sense: It's an all-comers spicy cooking competition, voted on by a tasting audience, just when we're in need of warmth. On this particular Saturday — chilly and crummy, of course — the spice eventually had me retiring my coat, hat and sweatshirt to the car. With sweaty cheeks, the layers were no longer necessary.

Then there's FisherPoets Gathering, which has to be held outside of summer's fishing seasons. The three-day event was inspired by founder Jon Broderick's trip to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, but rather than cowboys, the poems are written and read by commercial fishermen. (Dungeness crabbers, though, were still at



THE MOUTH PHOTO

An impressive spread at this year's Fiery Foods Festival at Relief Pitcher in Seaside

work.) And FisherPoets gains color from taking place in rotten weather, as many of the tales take place in the face of unrelenting nature.

More than February's weather, though, these three festivals are united by food. Eating and drinking are at their hearts.

As for Dark Arts, stout may be the food-iest of all beers. From savory to sweet, salty to bitter and beyond, stout is a gracious and malleable vessel. It's a brewer's beer. Which may be why so many beermongers from around the Northwest flocked to the Fort George campus.

A brief collection of ingredients included in the stouts: Peruvian cocoa nibs, pinot noir, basil, lemongrass, fennel, fig, chaga mushrooms, dulce de leche, lentils, star anise and Vermont maple syrup. And those were just some of the ones I didn't get to try.

Among the more exciting ones I did: a peppery Green Imperial Stout from Caldera Brewing Company with a twang of roasted green chiles, tomatillos and green peppercorns; Gigantic's Nevermind Oyster Stout, with briny Netarts

Bay oysters and oyster liquor (aka the liquid found inside the shell); and Mill City's Habanero Rum Trip Barrel. In each case, I wouldn't have complained if these left-field flavors were cranked up, brought further into the fore. Let's get wild!

(There was plenty of food at Dark Arts, but I had other dining obligations that evening. Still: There's opportunity to expand the fest's fare to feature much more stout.)

Speaking of habaneros, a few of those orange brats made it into Fiery Foods. But none of the 25 dishes entered in the competition had an unyielding heat. (Organizers learned early on that mind-bending spice was easy, palate-ruining and a whole lot less enjoyable than developed flavor with a reasonable kick.)

This year's Fiery Foods saw twice as many entrants as 2017. The Relief Pitcher was overstuffed and then some. Imagine dining in a crowded elevator and you're basically there. But all those bodies also meant that anticipation was bubbling. Many cooks had been working for days on their dishes: marinating, refining, dialing the



COLIN MURPHEY PHOTO

The Festival of Dark Arts in Astoria featured a wide variety of dark beers to sample.

heat up or down. Some were hell-bent on winning, others just happy to participate.

I was overcome by the sense of discovery: 25 home-cooked bites spanning from chilis to chowders to cupcakes, tacos, meatballs, pastas and so on.

My ballot, for what it's worth: 1.) a complex and vivacious Seafood Jambalaya complete with clams in the shell; 2.) a refreshing, wholesome, palate-pivoting African Peanut Chicken Stew; and 3.) Baby Back Ribs that were impeccably cooked and balanced. Alas, my votes had no overlap with the winners: 1.) Ghost Chowder; 2.) Teriyaki Meatballs; 3.) Ghost Chili.

But Fiery Foods adds up to more than just a contest, tasting or cheap meal. It's a vibrant potluck with a rustic local spirit. In a sea of crockpots, platters and bowls spread across a pool table, all from different households and boasting family recipes, a community is forged. I met one attendee who'd attended Fiery Foods each of its 21 years. He wasn't an outlier.

As it were, FisherPoets, too, is entering adulthood, celebrating its 21st year.

And while the literature performed by the FisherPoets tends to focus more on the physicality,

lifestyle and grit and grind of grueling labor and awesome nature, I kept coming back to dinner — it's ostensibly the driving force that keeps these men and women returning to places like Bristol Bay every summer and deploying their gillnets.

Rarely is the journey of any food from the wild to the table so vividly depicted. I was taken by the removal of abstraction, the remarkable lengths, the fortitude required. Indeed, few if any foods require the personal risk or sacrifice of commercial fishing.

In terms of commercial salmon fishing, I find it rather remarkable that fisherman — at least these FisherPoets — retain such romanticism for the process, the fish, the natural cycle.

Unlikely or contrary as it may appear, some FisherPoets double as activists. One sang about protecting immigrant workers. Another was a documentary filmmaker protesting a mine proposed at the mouth of Bristol Bay, the epicenter of Alaskan salmon fishing.

While film certainly is an avenue to making a difference, the director might want to include a meal at his screening. Change requires building a community, and, as these festivals show, food does just that. **CV**