

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

An EVOO evening is a class, dinner, show rolled into one

Review and photos by
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While you'll certainly leave satiated, perhaps even elated, EVOO is not exactly a restaurant.

Because restaurants don't send you home with their recipes. And they don't ask you to introduce yourself to the group, or offer to take you on a guided trip to Italy.

And, certainly, restaurants don't feature so many rounds of applause.

EVOO's full name — EVOO Cannon Beach Cooking School — alludes to their unique position but tells only half the story.

An evening at EVOO (short for Extra Virgin Olive Oil) is a multi-faceted experience — something like a class, show and dinner rolled into one.

EVOO feels like a response to the popularity of cooking shows, one that gives the audience not only a front-row seat but a taste to boot.

For these privileges you'll pay a pretty penny.

Dinner shows at EVOO, which require reservations, cost around \$150 per person, before tip. You're paying as much for the performance as for multiple courses and wine pairings. (Throughout, EVOO pitches products used in the show like pans, seasonings and a house-made sea salt that costs \$35 a jar.)

Meals are prepared and served around a large island counter below a stainless steel hood ringed with spotlights. Mirrors are perched and angled so diners can keep tabs on what's cooking on the central stove.

Owners and principals, the husband and wife team of Bob Neroni and Lenore Emery, are the show's stars, but they couldn't do it alone. A team including prep cooks, bakers and servers works diligently and unobtrusively.

Neroni's cuisine stems from his Italian-Jewish heritage — whole food cooking with plenty of oils,



Bob Neroni, right, and Lenore Emery

herbs, garlic and wine, plus a sense that dining brings people together. Neroni's culinary philosophies are proffered in a series of mantras, or "Bob-isms." Among them: "wine is food," "texture, texture, texture," "good alone, better together," and "foods that grow together go together."

This last aphorism alludes to seasonality and locavorism, which EVOO practices to a point. While they use some regionally grown veggies and herbs, including those grown in their own garden, EVOO sources from outside the Northwest when it suits them. Were they instead to limit their sourcing radius, meals would end up being wilder but occasionally more challenging for less adventurous eaters.

Nonetheless, EVOO has set up a number of hoops — education, performance, taste — to jump through. It's a delicate dance — imagine sharing worthwhile information to household cooks of varying proficiencies, while cracking jokes and landing food that dazzles. As such, your enjoyment of EVOO depends as much on your hunger for information and embrace of spectacle as it does on your taste for the food.

After more than a decade of refining their edu-tainment, Bob and



Grilled NY strip steak with rutabaga mash and frisee and balsamic cippolini onion



Scallops with saffron tomato ceci puree and micro greens

Lenore walk these tightropes with confidence.

Dinner show menus change monthly. The show I attended in March was titled "Small Plates, Big Wines." The plates weren't all that small. And despite the discussion, I'm not sure I could tell you exactly what exemplifies a "big wine,"

besides what was offered in the evening's program: "'big' wines are consumed more in winter when we tend to eat richer foods," and they are "fuller" (higher in sugar and alcohol).

In keeping with the menu-as-program motif, courses were presented as acts.

Act One, featuring pan-seared red Idaho trout with crispy skin, crème fraiche with trout roe and a Waldorf-like apple salad with fresh radish, exemplified the Bob-ism of "good alone, better together." Combining the three elements together on a crostini made for the best bite. Creamy, salty, sweet and crunchy, everything played exceedingly well together. Fresh and light, Act One's was a dish worthy and indicative of spring. It also inspired me, when cooking fish, to experiment more with neutral oils like grapeseed, rather than the olive oil I've been using, which brings its own inflection.

Act Two paired a saffron tomato ceci puree with seared scallops. The sauce, from a base of cherry tomatoes and chickpeas (aka "ceci"), had a lively natural sweetness, dialed up by extra roasting of the tomatoes, which diminishes acidity.

Act Three included a deep, thick,

IF YOU GO

**EVOO Cannon Beach
Cooking School**

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Hours: Dinner shows generally run Thursday through Saturday, but schedules vary and reservations are required. For more see evoo.biz/show-schedule

meaty, explosively garlic-y romesco sauce, a radicchio and endive salad and a duck breast punched up with spicy harissa oil. It taught me that when the fat is done rendering, the duck breast will no longer look shiny, but exhibit a matte finish like that of a dollar bill.

Act Four, a grilled NY strip steak with buttery rutabaga mash, frisee and tangy, balsamic glazed cippolini onions, was the most straightforward, least exciting dish of the evening. While nicely crusted and medium rare, the steak stopped well short of spectacular.

Act Five, however, ended the show on a high note. A dessert of sour cream chocolate cake with toasted meringue and little scoops of Tia Maria chocolate ice cream and strawberry sorbet, drizzled with basil oil, was irresistible. The strawberry sorbet, infused with champagne, had a bubbly effervescence, bright against the creamy, rich chocolates.

As the dessert plates were set before us, Bob and Lenore took their final bow, and after a final round of applause the showgoers reclined, sipped espresso and shared stories.

A entrancing mix of exhausted and exhilarated, my date and I left buzzing, partly from the wine but just as much the sensory bombardment; sight, smell, taste and touch had been deeply engaged. Of course, any fine, multi-course meal will do that. EVOO adds a torrent of teaching. Together, it's an engaging culinary experience you won't find anywhere else on the coast — an experience that's as intent on stoking your brain as much as your belly. 