

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Capricorn should double down on Romanian fare — but would diners like it?

Review and photos by
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I can't tell you how many times I lingered on the sidewalk in front of Capricorn Pub & Fine Foods, waiting for something to pull me in.

The entrance, you see, is a bit awkward. And so is what you can see from the street: a pool table and long bar but no tables to eat at. Often it looked empty. Only after I finally went inside did I discover the booths tucked deep in the rear of the restaurant and, lo and behold, there were actually a few people eating at them.

Clearly, though, Capricorn hopes to be more than just a restaurant. Wanting to be many things at once — a pub, cafe, restaurant and club — it's a bit of a jumble. Underneath the spacious ceilings there's a jukebox pumping foreign language techno pop, a karaoke machine, dance floor, TVs, a foosball table and yet plenty of room to spare.

I was seated by the charming and gregarious co-owner Elana Shern, who runs Capricorn with her husband, Tom. She highlighted a few menu items drawing from her Romanian heritage — her grandmothers' recipes, she said.

Against the alternative — fried dive-bar standbys — it wasn't even a choice: Romanian all the way.

A cross between a soup and a stew, the Romanian Stuffed Pepper (\$11.95) was a grandma recipe in the best way: whole

foods, hearty and warming. In a bowl of thin, oily tomato broth a green bell pepper peaked out. It was stuffed with a meaty-rice-mix — of pork, beef, onions and white rice — that recalled a terrifically seasoned meatball. Among the many spices grandma used: Greek basil, cayenne, dill, paprika, thyme, bay leaf. The long-cooked pepper melted in my mouth.

The dish comes with a side of sour cream, meant to be stirred into the broth for creamy tang and slices of puffy toast for sopping up the broth. It's a comfort food I'd put up against grilled cheese and tomato soup any day.

Incorporating the same meaty-rice-mix and tomato broth, the Traditional Romanian Cabbage Rolls were extraordinarily similar to the stuffed pepper. If not identical, the cabbage rolls and stuffed pepper are fraternal twins.

I devoured the Beef Gyro (\$12.95) with nostalgia, for not only my trip to Greece in the early 2000s, but for my favorite Greek deli in Portland (RIP Foti's). The gyro's beef crumbles were elevated, compellingly seasoned. The pillowy pita was overflowing with a carefully chopped and tossed mix of red onions, lettuce, Kalamata olives, feta cheese and cooling tzatziki. It overflowed from the pita as if to make a slight side salad.

That familiar Mediterranean mix too becomes the base of My Big Fat Greek Salad (\$12).

And that's most all of Capricorn's Romanian/European fare.

From there the menu falls off a cliff into a deep fryer — cheap



Beef Gyro



Crispy Chicken Sandwich

dive-bar food like fish and chips, mozzarella sticks, jalapeño poppers and other forms of ennui.

After the regional treats, I had little interest in greasy, bready bar snacks. But, to be sure I wasn't sleeping on some hidden gem, I tried the Crispy Chicken Sandwich (\$11.95). It was sadder and blander than I feared. You can get a vastly superior, substantial and enjoyable chicken sandwich at Wendy's. Plus the chicken sandwiches at Wendy's don't come with rubberized squares of half-melted, off-brand

Kraft American cheese. And they don't cost \$12.

In a town brimming with pub food, Astoria doesn't need any that's half-hearted.

Now I bet you can see where this is going ... I thought I could. I figured that in an ideal world Capricorn Pub would be all the better if they doubled down on the Romanian and European specialties, dishes that share Elana's proud European culture.

I asked Elana if she'd considered that route. She said she had, and that she hopes to add

CAPRICORN PUB & FINE FOODS

Rating: ★★

1040 Commercial St.
Astoria, Ore. 97103

503-741-3788

Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 a.m.
Monday through Friday, 7 a.m.
to 2:30 a.m. Saturday
and Sunday

Price: \$ — Most dishes around
\$12

Service: Charming but
occasionally absentminded

Vegetarian / Vegan Options:
I'd recommend the
Mediterranean salad

Drinks: Full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

more in the future. She said she also dabbles regularly with daily specials like a traditional "gypsy stew," another grandma-approved recipe, slow cooked with potatoes and onions. Elana added that in Romania she grew up eating a lot lamb.

And here comes the twist.

When Capricorn opened in the summer of 2016, they made gyros as they often are in Europe: with lamb. Nobody in Astoria wanted them, she said. Six months later, when Elana replaced the lamb with beef, the gyros started selling.

So I'm at a bit of a loss.

I mean, I have my feelings about Capricorn: that the tables should be up front, pool table in back, and that homemade Romanian fare should crowd out the crummy bar snacks. But then again, who knows how the market might react?

What I can suggest with absolute certainty: Astoria, you needn't fear lamb. Lamb is delicious. Especially in a gyro. 