

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## Fulio's Pastaria chef dreams up exciting, borderless specials

Review and photos by  
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**S**ean Whittaker has earned his stripes.

Teamed with Jonathan Hoffman, Whittaker scored back-to-back wins in the Iron Chef Goes Coastal competition in 2014 and 2015. In a pressure-packed stopwatch environment, in front of judges and a crowd of hundreds, he proved he could think and execute on his feet.

Back then, Whittaker was representing Astoria Coffee House & Bistro, a restaurant on the forefront of Astoria's food-y revitalization. And though he and ownership parted ways before opening day, Whittaker also had a hand in shaping Caruthers' original menu.

In the spring of 2017, Whittaker became executive chef of Fulio's Pastaria. The restaurant, which opened in the early oughts, was in the midst of a torch-passing. After 14 years, server Allan LaPlante assumed ownership. With extensive knowledge of the business, LaPlante chose to keep what works while making room to honor Whittaker's polyglot inspiration.

The ostensibly Italian restaurant's regular menu grew to incorporate influences from around the Mediterranean. But it's wider than that: Each week Whittaker dreams up four or five specials, the provenance of which knows no boundaries.

You never know what you might find — a spicy South American steak, a dish rife with African spices or raw fish, Japanese-style.

Which is exciting. And why anytime I'm nearby I peak in to see what Whittaker's whipped up. Recent specials have included tuna

poke tacos, springer salmon with Hawaiian fried rice, Portuguese mac and cheese, razor clam hushpuppies and a hulking tomahawk pork chop.

Which is to say: Don't attach an inordinate amount of weight to Fulio's "Pastaria" moniker. If you're not feeling like housemade noodles, there's plenty else to choose from.

That said, settling on what to order can be vexing. There's a lot.

I do, however, find myself most drawn to the specials. While Fulio's regular Italian/Mediterranean menu — teeming with olive oils, tomatoes, seafoods, steaks and pasta — is reliably traditional, the specials are sparkling and adventurous.

To wit: The regular menu steaks come with a red wine demi-glace reduction or compound butter. The Santa Maria Flank steak special shimmered with flourishes, including anchiote, New Mexican hatch chili, corn-avocado salsa and chimichurri.

Compared to the specials, much of Fulio's regular menu feels two-dimensional. The specials are in 3D: deeper, more intense and vivid.

Which is not to shake a stick at, say, the tangy Caesar salad (generously priced at \$5), or the familiar, meaty and grandma-approved Ragu (\$15). The Checca (\$18) — a linguini tossed with olive oil, lemon, white wine and prawns, basil, tomatoes and garlic — has that elemental, whole-food simplicity of Mediterranean cooking, though it remained but the sum of its parts.

Like many of the dishes at Fulio's, the Checca was dotted with a few fire-engine red Peruvian peppers known as "sweety drops." Bursting like juicy grapes, these joyous firecrackers are a Fulio's



Pacific Northwest Gumbo



Ahi Salad



Shakshuka

signature. More than the two or three in the Checca, I would've welcomed a dozen.

My favorite of the specials I sampled was the Pacific Northwest Gumbo (\$24), made regional by the addition of rockfish, Puget Sound steamer clams and Willapa bay oysters along with linguica, bell peppers, tomatoes and okra. In a heaping portion teeming with the textures of so many portions, Whittaker makes a strong case for the normalization of a Northwest gumbo. Heck, add some Dungeness crab and, come summer, go whole hog with the local harvest of carrots, root vegetables, squash and so on.

Aside from his borderless inspiration, the gumbo hits on an important aspect of Whittaker's style: It was hefty. Even with fancier preparations he retains some blue-collar sensibility, a reflection of the character of Astoria itself.

Similarly mirroring its surroundings, Fulio's manages to be welcoming and casual. It's hardly stuffy but not quite elegant. There are white napkins, but no white gloves. Service sometimes varies, hindered in part by the building's deep floor-plan. With the kitchen in the very back, servers sometimes vanish for extended periods, which is a bummer when you just need a spoon. (Doing these elongated laps, servers at Fulio's must be in marathon-ready shape.)

But Whittaker's execution is unwavering. The yellowfin tuna in the Ahi Salad special (\$15) was expertly seared. The accompanying creamy Southwestern vinaigrette dressing was a close cousin to Caesar.

The Shakshuka (\$14) appetizer special was very much at home in the Mediterranean vein. A Middle Eastern dish of eggs poached in tomatoes, peppers, onions and cumin,

### FULIO'S PASTARIA

**Rating:** ★★★★★

1149 Commercial St.  
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**Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m.  
Monday-Saturday, 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday

**Price:** \$\$ – Entrées \$10 to \$30

**Service:** Charming, casual, occasionally missing

**Vegetarian / Vegan Options:** Numerous

**Drinks:** Full bar

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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



Checca

it nailed that breakfast-for-dinner sweet spot, the remaining sauce and yolk beckoning to be mopped up with grilled pita bread.

It was as so much at Fulio's is: serviceable, stout, globally aware.

Which makes the America-centric baseball analogy I'm about to use feel kind of weak, but I can't think of how to tell it with the language of soccer:

Fulio's is like a hitter with a great batting average — one who gets on base with ease and regularity, who hits a lot of doubles and triples but not a ton of home runs.

The foundations of Fulio's many flavors are unshakable but, because there are so many of them, rarely developed into the sublime.

So if you're in need of a home run, I'd start by checking out the specials. 