

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

America's First Foodie Dinner at Sand Trap honors James Beard,

GEARHART'S GREAT GOURMAND

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It used to be called the James Beard Dinner.

But in this, its fifth, year, it seems McMenamins Sand Trap was discouraged from using the name of James Beard, the titanic gourmand whose ties to Gearhart were deep and formative.

In an introduction to the meal (now called the America's First Foodie Dinner), the host, an event manager from McMenamins — itself a large company with enviable holdings — seemed to suggest that the business of Beard is even bigger.

Indeed, the New York City-based nonprofit James Beard House is nothing if not big business.

The James Beard Awards, which began in 1991, six years after Beard's death, are the Oscars for restaurants. Categories include Best New Restaurant, Outstanding Baker and Restaurant Design. And just like their film equivalents, wins are career-changing.

I mentioned the upcoming dinner to a few friends. Anyone who didn't work in a restaurant was mostly unfamiliar with Beard. The few non-cooks who recognized the name associated it with the awards, not the man.

Alongside Julia Child, Beard was one of America's first celebrity chefs. The New York Times dubbed him the "Dean of American cookery." He had a table at the Four Seasons, taught, wrote cookbooks and inspired America

to eat and cook not only better but with richness and poise.

While his professional life was in New York City and included frequent trips throughout Europe, Beard remained profoundly connected to Gearhart, where his Portland-based family spent summers when he was a child.

"(T)hose busy days on the Oregon Coast," he wrote in "Delights and Prejudices," "left their mark on me," and "no place on earth has done as much to influence my professional life."

Beard marveled at the coast's abundance, not only of the seafood — Dungeness crab, razor clams,

salmon cheeks and more — but the conditions for growing astounding produce.

In Beard's twilight years, Gearhart became a refuge. He taught culinary classes at Seaside High School and relished dining

at the Ark Restaurant on the Long Beach Peninsula. When he died in 1985, Beard's ashes were scattered on the Pacific.

So, while meals honoring or inspired by Beard would be welcome anywhere, they're especially relevant in Gearhart and on the North Coast.

The America's First Foodie Dinner was arranged family-style. About several dozen diners sat at two long tables dotted with tall, flickering candles. In the Sand Trap's downstairs rooms for private events, it felt a bit like eating at a wedding. (They often cater them there.) Compared to most of the fixed menu meals I've attended on the coast, this was less intimate. Usually a restaurant doing a special event turns itself over totally



Eaters enjoy the America's First Foodie Dinner, formerly known as the James Beard Dinner, at McMenamins Sand Trap.

to the production; this was just a little corner of the Sand Trap; the rest of the place hummed away in regular business.

The meal began with circling platters of hors d'oeuvres: oysters on the half shell with champagne mignonette, puff pastries with snippets of Dungeness crab and, most charmingly, Beard's delightfully simple tea sandwiches of onion and mayonnaise on brioche. The gooey, creamy little bites are almost a hack: That bliss need not be complicated. (Mayonnaise was a pillar of the Beard household. At his mother's boarding house, mayonnaise was mixed for guests at the table, to order.)

Each course came with an alcohol pairing, included with gratuity for \$100. All but one (an iced-out digestif of Glenlivet) came from the McMenamins empire. There was red, white, brandy and sherry. (McMenamins also makes beer and spirits.) The most indelible of them was, by far, the Alambic, a brandy with cognac-like heat and intensity.

It came with the second course, a charcuterie plate, which featured

a chicken liver mousse named Julia and James' — as in Child and Beard. In the program, Beard was said to have punched up Child's recipe with more sherry. It certainly was smooth.

Besides proffering some much-needed greens and acids, the following course — seared albacore with watercress in a lemon-tarragon vinaigrette — felt for the first and perhaps only time we were really tasting Oregon, in season. The watercress were fresh and earthy, and while this catch was on the lean side and cut too thin, we are in the midst of tuna season. As much as what was on the plate, that taste of Oregon — the terroir — extended to the glass, a buttery chardonnay.

The main course was a lamb shank osso bucco in a fig-cognac reduction with fingerling potatoes. With a fairly dark, intense char, I found the most tender, succulent meat in the center. The bone, filled with marrow and easy to pull out, provided some insulation from overcooking and a backstop for the juices. But when I looked around, too many diners had only poked

around the outside, leaving the best part untouched.

Dessert — a supple, wine-poached pair — garnered the most rave reviews of the evening.

At times, though, food seemed of secondary importance. At least around those I was seated, golf and business were more exciting discussions than food. Which felt, considering the meal's inspiration, a little odd. As one diner remarked after reading the program and discovering the meal would finish with a smidgen of Glenlivet: "The more I learn about this James Beard guy, the more I like him."

Such a meal, however, could stand to teach us much more about Beard's taste, technique and connection to Gearhart. And with a few tweaks, it could.

The first would be to use more seafood. In Beard's estimation, Dungeness crab is the "Pacific's greatest blessing," he wrote, "to my mind unequaled by anything in the shellfish world." Here, Dungeness was an afterthought. It should've been a featured course.

Salmon and razor clams, too, were staples of Beard's Gearhart diet. Salmon cheeks, which Beard and his mother would get from Astoria, would've been a delicate and exciting addition.

And while room remains for dishes like lamb, it could've been prepared Beard's way: with tarragon and cream, which Beard wrote, "combine to make a crust of the meat and a most pleasing flavor."

Nonetheless, it's heartening to see a regional restaurant pay homage to the Gearhart lion. Here's hoping more establishments join in honoring and drawing inspiration from his local legacy.

Because James Beard ought to be thought of as more than just the name of a prestigious award, especially around here. **CW**