

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Salmonberry Saloon breathes new life into revered space

Review and photos by
THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA
MOUTH@COASTWEEKEND.COM
FACEBOOK.COM/MOUTHOFTHECOLUMBIA

Outside of Astoria, restaurants with waterfront views are surprisingly hard to come by on the North Coast. Which makes Wheeler's Salmonberry Saloon, planted on the banks of the Nehalem Bay, a gem from the get-go.

But the Salmonberry is much more than a sweet deck for burgers and beer.

New owners Chantelle Hylton and Patrick Rock have seen to that, not only with extensive interior renovations but a devotion to local foods cultivated by a team of passionate crafters.

When Hylton and Rock bought the place last year (longtime residents may recall it as the Tsunami Grill property), they recognized the sweet spot that is the Nehalem River Valley: the crossroads of coast and country, where fishermen and farmers meet.

Hylton and Rock assembled a team psyched on the potential of that abundance. Based on what local farms and ranchers can offer, chef Mike Aldridge is writing menus weekly. On them the purveyors are listed, including produce from North Fork 53, seafood from Community-Supported Fishery and beef from Lance's Farm Vittles. Even the tortillas, from Three Sisters Nixtamal, are made locally.

The specialists at the Salmonberry continue. They have their own baker (who's selling loaves to go), coffee expert and so on.

If this all sounds a bit too hipster-y, fear not: The Salmonberry is far from pretentious, responsive to its blue-collar surroundings. Locals who enjoyed

the place in the past ought to have every reason to love it now.

That's partly because the filling portions remain, and the prices are mostly reasonable. All day long you can get Hamm's beer, on tap, for just \$2.50. A happy hour special once included a pint with six chicken wings for \$6. Who can beat that?

Indeed, a significant chunk of the menu remains familiar and approachable bar food: No plate is being assembled with tweezers. Burgers, fries, steaks and hefty fried things abound.

But there are more refined choices, too, where thoughtful and vivid flavors unfurl.

These are often the daily specials, which have, at least on my visits, tended toward the elemental and exciting. They often reflect seafood that's in season — clams, mussels, lingcod, halibut collar and others — but there's been quail, steaks, pork loin and more.

From the specials, I had the Chinook Salmon (\$26). It had a terrific thin crust and flaky, buttery, melty insides. It was sourced and cooked as well as, if not better than, you'll find at most fine-dining establishments in the region. The accoutrements — braised fennel, gremolata, asparagus and grapes sliced thin as dimes — were well paired and similarly delectable.

Another special, the Elote (\$5) — Mexican-style grilled corn on the cob — was gleefully messy. An endearingly messy swirl of avocado crema, Cotija cheese, cilantro and chili spices, it took me to a backyard BBQ.

I dabbled in the regular menu, too, though deciding what to sample at the Salmonberry was tougher than usual: I wanted so much to try the poke, the cioppino, the kale Caesar



Grilled Chicken Sandwich



Elote

and more. I'll get to them eventually, time and waistline willing.

As an especially food-focused friend raved about the Grilled Chicken Sandwich (\$14) and its vibrant chimichurri, I had to try it. He was right to do so. The chicken breast in this stout fire hydrant of a sandwich was perfectly grilled, the bun terrific, the slaw bright and the quick pickles delightful.

I had a side salad with housemade avocado Dijon vinaigrette dressing. (All of the dressings are house-made.) It had the kind of freshness you don't find at most restaurants, and an earthiness you normally find only at the farmers market.

This is the taste of the North Coast.

I found it, too, in the Rockfish Tacos (\$18), and the Charcuterie Board (\$16), which featured a parade of pickled local produce and cheese

from Nestucca Bay Creamery. It isn't usually the case with such a dish that you find yourself wanting for more bread, but the hearty, rustic wheat of Phil's Wild Bread was actually in short supply. It's good freakin' bread!

You'll find similar dedication at the bar. A daily special Smoked Blackberry Margarita (\$10) was the most permeating, lingering smoke I've ever drank. It got that way because someone took the time to smoke local blackberries at the height of the season. (And by "height of season" I mean both the blackberries and the tourist influx.)

How the Salmonberry's dovetailing with local produce and meats shifts throughout the leaner winter months remains to be seen. But given their ingenuity heretofore, I've no reason to doubt. During the dark time of year, when traffic is down

SALMONBERRY SALOON

Rating: ★★☆☆

380 S. Marine Drive
Wheeler, Ore. 97147
503-714-1423

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday, Wednesday and Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Monday and Tuesday.

Price: \$-\$\$ — Deals to be had alongside refined local offerings

Service: Engaged and inspired

Drinks: Full bar

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

but locals need outlets, not only of community but creativity, the Salmonberry's crafting could flourish.

Speaking of expansion, I'd be remiss not to mention the stage upstairs. Or at least there used to be a stage, back in the Tsunami Grill days. I've heard it was one of the more compelling concert venues on the North Coast. And knowing the history of co-owner Hylton, I can't help but wonder — or, rather, hope — if more music is in the Salmonberry's future.

You see, Hylton had a successful career as a concert booker. She was a trendsetter in Portland before moving to New York City, working at the top of the industry.

In the lead-up to the Salmonberry's opening, Hylton booked a concert to promote of the restaurant's coming. It was a good get: Chris Thomas King, known for his role in the film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" A sign of things to come? A second phase? Time will tell.

But first and foremost, Salmonberry is a restaurant. Food comes first, and it's thoughtful and excellent. Into this revered space, the Salmonberry team's bubbling enthusiasm and know-how have breathed new life. **CW**