

# Seafood specials: sushi and surprise sturgeon

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

I'm tied up just about every Monday. It's the one night I almost never eat out.

So when I wriggled from my regular commitment one recent Monday I knew exactly where I was headed: Astoria Coffeehouse & Bistro's weekly sushi special.

It was a no-brainer. There isn't enough good sushi on the coast. There are a few serviceable joints that will scratch the itch, but only in the most basic of ways that stop far short of compelling.

The lack of good sushi can be frustrating. We live on the coast. Astoria is a fishing town. Certainly there's no shortage of restaurants offering fresh, quality seafood.

It's just that they're so intent on cooking it.

But during spring salmon season, for instance, when a luscious, fat-ribbed springer can't be exalted in its most elemental preparation — deboned, sliced and raw — it's hard not to be left wanting.

For a couple of years in the early 2010s, Fishes Sushi, led by chef John Newman, took a shot toward that higher end in Cannon Beach. It didn't last.

So perhaps Astoria Coffeehouse's Monday night sushi special is a way of threading that needle, between potential and demand.

There certainly was demand. I arrived to a waiting list. While it was hardly onerous, I wouldn't have minded the opportunity to sip a cocktail as I milled about. Or, rather, a "sakétini" — sushi night has drink specials to match.

Both the Yuzu Kamikaze and the Classic Sakétini (\$12 each) seamlessly incorporated Japanese rice wine. Alongside lime in the Kamikaze, a yuzu sake broadened the spectrum of citrus. Shaken with gin, the Sakétini began a traditional martini and finished with saké's vapor.



Clockwise from bottom: 'EEL' Electric Love Roll, Sashimi Plate, Dungeness crab Temaki at Astoria Coffeehouse & Bistro.

The Sunomono salad (\$5) arrived first, looking lovely: a vivid palette of greens, pinks (pickled red onions) and purples (shaved beets) with a citrusy, gingered Asian vinaigrette — a reminder that Japanese cuisine, as much as any other, relishes composition, balance and order.

The majority of the Monday menu revolved around a few proteins — yellowtail, tuna, salmon, scallops, eel and Dungeness crab — available in a handful of configurations: rolls, bowls, nigiri and sashimi.

The Sashimi Plate (\$15) — headlined by yellowtail, tuna, salmon and scallops — lacked exquisite knife

work, but proved nonetheless that the seafood at the Coffeehouse's special is of superior quality when compared to the region's regular sushi joints.

Against the essential sashimi, the "EEL" Electric Love Roll (\$24) — with sweet-sauced freshwater eel, avocado and cucumber blanketed by smoked salmon and ginger aioli — swirled eccentrically.

The Temaki hand roll with Dungeness crab was a steal for \$5. Lean and clean. The only thing I wouldn't order again was the dainty, basic Tekka Maki roll. Why pay \$6 for tuna when you could pay \$5 for



Seared sturgeon at the Wayfarer Restaurant & Lounge.

Dungeness crab?

The only real bummer, though, is that for the foreseeable future I don't have any more free Mondays. That's a shame, because Astoria Coffeehouse's special is the best semi-regular option for sushi in the region.

However, the Coffeehouse's wasn't the only seafood special I happened upon last week.

Indeed, this one was even rarer: sturgeon. This once-in-a-blue-moon catch was found at the Wayfarer Restaurant & Lounge in Cannon Beach.

I ended up there because old friends were vacationing in South County and they wanted oysters. Raw oysters. Not fried. Not in shot glasses. Freshly shucked.

Surprisingly, there are few raw oyster options in Cannon Beach, and the Wayfarer seemed the best. (As I mentioned in a recent column, the Wayfarer, along with sister restaurant the Stephanie Inn Dining Room, is among the region's premier ingredient shoppers.)

The oysters were delightful. And though we weren't particularly hungry — this was just drinks and a snack — the sturgeon special was too captivating. If we didn't try it here, we might be left wondering, perhaps forever.

Credit goes in part to our server,

who sold it well. (At \$51 a plate, that's no easy task.) He told us the sturgeon only shows up on the menu every few years, and then for only a few days.

That's due to a declining population, thanks in part to a growing cadre of hungry sea lions. As such, commercial fishing for sturgeon in the Lower Columbia has been closed since 2014. The Wayfarer got theirs from Native American tribes who retain fishing rights along the Columbia.

The air of decadence didn't end with the sizable slab of grilled whitefish: It was bejeweled with a crown of early season "button" chanterelles and accompanied by fingerling potatoes, beets and Romano beans from a nearby farm.

But we were here, now, for the sturgeon. It was flaky but substantial, sturdier than any whitefish I can recall. But the brawn was enticing, almost steak-like. Sturgeon is high-octane food.

Whether it justifies a \$51 price tag is another matter. Indeed, we were paying as much for the story and the exclusivity as we were for the protein, if not more so.

Money and access aside, it's hard not to imagine I'd be happier and healthier if seafood specials like these suddenly became the norm. **CW**