

# MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local  
restaurant review

## South Bay's frybread is a rare treat in the region

Review and photos by  
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**T**he Seitz family came with a hook.

As owner-operators of both a fishing boat and a market-slash-restaurant, they are involved in every step, from ocean to table.

When South Bay Wild Fish House Restaurant & Seafood Market opened in Astoria this summer, I figured the Seitzes' all-encompassing narrative would help distinguish them in case they deigned to heap yet more fish, chips and chowder onto the regional pile.

Turns out South Bay's most essential dish, frybread, can't be found anywhere else in the Columbia-Pacific.

The 150-year-old frybread has Navajo origins. According to Smithsonian Magazine, when forced from Arizona to New Mexico, farming was no longer feasible for the tribe. "To prevent the indigenous populations from starving," the Smithsonian writes, "the government gave them canned goods as well as white flour, processed sugar and lard — the makings of frybread."

"Frybread is the story of our survival," said author Sherman Alexie. The dish, according to the Smithsonian, "represents both perseverance and pain" — unhealthy as a dietary staple and a reminder of oppression, frybread became popular nonetheless. It's satisfying at a fundamental level.

Rob Seitz likely came across frybread while growing up in Alaska, where it, too, became entwined with indigenous culture.

According to Tiffani Seitz, frybread provided South Bay with an answer to a vexing question:

How do you make a substantial meal from Dungeness crab when the meat costs something like \$34 per pound (retail)? The classic crab melt, Tiffani said, didn't add up. I'll say the flavor doesn't cut it, either.

What the Seitzes and South Bay have done pairing frybread and Dungeness crab, however, is worthy of our regional delicacy. It is at once substantial and irresistible, comforting and fresh.

South Bay's take on frybread is something like a seafood salad on a funnel cake. Frybread is the foundation, a plate-sized, golden crusted pillow of fried dough topped with spreads of prickly red pepper tapenade, dry goat cheese, sprinkled with succulent Dungeness crab, and a mountain of spicy arugula tossed in a zippy-sweet lemon shallot dressing. While the frybread is fatty and filling, the accoutrements are clean, lean and sharp — it's the best of both worlds.

South Bay's frybreads are available with a choice of spread — red pepper tapenade and parsley chimichurri — and seafood: Dungeness (\$18), Oregon pink shrimp (\$14) or smoked black cod (\$18). While I'm open to mixing and matching, I found bliss with crab and the red pepper tapenade.

One evening near closing, Rob brought an order of frybread for the couple to share, something to nosh on after a busy Saturday night. They could have anything, and chose the frybread. Which tells me just about everything I need to know.

On the evenings I visited, Tiffani and Rob worked front of house. The dining room and bar at South Bay are upstairs, a loft above the kitchen and market. (Though the market is more of a deli case.) It's a tight but



Banh Mi.

efficient squeeze, a layout regularly found in space-starved cities. Besides the couple's earnestness, I enjoyed their insight into every detail — if you have a question, they have the answer.

Rob began fishing in Alaska. He relocated to the North Coast in 1992 after the Exxon Valdez spill fouled the waters. In 2011 the couple acquired a trawler and joined the California Groundfish Collective, a group devoted to sustainable practices. But the economics, and the lack of a retirement plan, weren't adding up. The Seitzes returned to Astoria and removed the middleman. Hence: South Bay Wild Fish House Restaurant and Seafood Market.

This summer the South Bay trawler mostly shrimped. This fall it pivots to Petrale sole. Obviously one trawler isn't enough to supply a restaurant, and South Bay relies on other local boats and purveyors to fill in the gaps.

In the cooler (and on the menu) you'll find seafood that's mostly sustainable and fished in the region: Dungeness crab, rockfish, tuna, clams, oysters and the like. While you won't find much of it on the menu now as the salmon season has passed, there was a whole Coho on ice. It came from a boat in Alaska — friends of the family.

The man at the cooler — a Seitz



Seafood frybread with Dungeness crab, roasted red pepper and tapenade.



Rockfish tacos.

in-law — told me their fish comes from similar sources in Astoria: boats they know, who treat the catch with care and respect. It's the basics: Get 'em cold quick, don't leave 'em on the dock, don't beat 'em up.

So, I asked, what was best at the moment? And to be sure: When ordering at a place like South Bay, "What's good today?" is an essential question.

This day it was the Petrale sole. While found on few local menus, the simple whitefish is abundant in the region; it just happens most is shipped elsewhere.

I had the sole in the Banh Mi (\$15), a Vietnamese sandwich found in only a handful of restaurants in the area. The easy whitefish was lightly grilled and buttery. The sandwich was massive to the point it was hard to eat; things were squirting out every which way.

Now, having too much isn't hardly the worst problem to have, though the river of oil flowing from the fish nearly was. With Sriracha mayo, lettuce, cucumber, cilantro, a sweet and sour carrot and daikon relish and a few absolutely scorching jalapeños, the Banh Mi shared traits with the frybread in that both were bread-y and leavened with plenty of ruffage and lean protein. (Come to think of it, with their fried fish and oysters and hefty hero sandwich fixin's, South

### SOUTH BAY WILD FISH HOUSE

Rating: ★★☆☆

262 9th St.  
Astoria, Ore.  
503-741-3000

**Hours:** 11 a.m.–9 p.m.  
Wednesday through Saturday, 11 a.m.–3 p.m. Sunday through Monday

**Price:** \$\$ – most entrées in the mid-to-high-teens

**Vegetarian/Vegan Options:**  
Pescatarian minimum

**Service:** A knowledgeable fishing family

**Drinks:** Full bar

#### KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

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

Bay could easily add a killer Po' Boy.)

Of the more mundane options — i.e., fish and chips, chowder and fish tacos — I had the last, with grilled rockfish (\$13). While filled with plenty of cabbage, pico de gallo, a smear of avocado and sprinkled with cotija cheese, the tortillas got soggy quick. Even if the tortillas weren't tearing, the fish tacos would still be basic. Yawn.

The Caesar Salad (\$8) had a luxurious, creamy dressing that, like the cocktail and tartar sauces, is made in-house. For \$5 more I got a good deal of subtly smoked salmon that made for a light meal in itself.

And while there are dishes on the menu I'm still curious about — the poke and ceviche, especially when salmon and tuna come back in season — it's the frybread I can't stop thinking about.

Indeed, along with an innovative ocean-to-table model, South Bay brings a dish of cultural import otherwise missing from the North Coast. Better yet, they adapted it to feature a regional delicacy. Have it with Dungeness crab!