

A lot of love in Bucket Bites' pasties

By the way, it's pronounced 'pass-teez'

By RYAN HUME
FOR COAST WEEKEND

The name Bucket Bites alone didn't exactly prepare me for what I was about to dive into at this food truck parked perpendicular to the popular El Asadero on Marine Drive near the Astoria Eco Wash.

For me, the word "bucket" conjures up piles of glistening fried chicken, but after a look at their logo, it becomes clear that "bucket" here refers to a metal lunch pail. Leave it then to the truck itself and its handsome paint job to announce what owners Christine and Chris Karna are really shelling: pasties and gravy and pies and sides.

The truck's exterior even offers a tip on correct pronunciation to the uninitiated. It's "pass-teez," not "pay-steez," like the nipple guards. Though Christine Karna doesn't mind if you mispronounce it, "I may make you dance for your food," she joked.

Pasties, imported to the States long ago from England, are a hand pie or turnover spiritually linked to empanadas or calzones. All sorts of meats and vegetables can be slid onto a round of dough before it is crimped and baked golden, and Bucket Bites has many unique combinations, all handmade by Karna herself and named after different kinds of laborers the couple knew from their time in Pennsylvania and Alaska.

There are a few menu staples, as well as a rotating pasty special to keep things interesting. All cost \$8.

A recent Gardener pasty was packed with potatoes, riced cauliflower and cheddar cheese. The cheese seemed more of an afterthought, offering no stringy pulls or gooey pockets, but it did keep the heavy vegetable filling from getting too dry. The saving grace here was a cup of tomato and roasted pepper soup that Christine Karna smartly sold as a "near-gravy" vegetarian option. Each dunk provided the moisture the pasty needed and ended up becoming the predominant, tangy flavor of the meal. The Prospector fared a similar fate. It

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Bucket Bites

- **Rating:** 3 stars out of a possible 5
- **Address:** 490 W. Marine Drive, Astoria
- **Hours:** Winter hours: noon-4:30 p.m. Wednesday; 11 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Thursday/Friday/Saturday. Note: Hours can be sporadic. They often close early if they sell out. Check Facebook for updates. Orders can also be placed in advance for pick-up by texting 503-495-4995.
- **Price:** \$
- **Service:** Most days, this is a one-woman show. Christine Karna has a gregarious bedside manner. The service is fast when the order is in stock.
- **Vegetarian/vegan options:** There is always one if not two rotating vegetarian pasties on the menu each week. Some are vegan but not always. Rotating soups are also often vegetarian and vegan.
- **Drinks:** Coke products, bottled water and teas — general food truck beverages.

should be noted that Bucket Bites bakes its pasties throughout the day until they are gone. There was one Prospector left on the hot rack but another batch would be coming fresh from the oven in five minutes. I opted not to wait, but in the future, I would. The combination features scratch-made corned beef, eggs and home fries.

Time is not kind to scrambled eggs, and a heat lamp can be a cruel tanning bed. While the corned beef offered excellent flavor, the eggs at this point had cemented rather than offering a pillowy counterpoint to the heft of the diced potatoes.

This, again, put a lot of pressure on the \$2 side of sausage gravy, which Christine Karna recommended to accompany this pasty. Sausage gravy, that Southern staple that has become ubiquitous at break-



Ryan Hume

Slater pasty, beef gravy, cole slaw from Bucket Bites.

fast spots coast to coast, can have a viscosity running from skim milk to gelatinous. Bucket Bites rightly errs on the thinner side. It still has enough weight to coat a spoon, but it does also trickle through the cracks in the filling's foundation, lubricating every bite.

The above is meant less as a criticism and more as a realization of the reality Bucket Bites faces.

Most food carts, or restaurants for that matter, can prep their ingredients, then cook to order. Selling hot baked goods requires more time and a heap of faith. Anticipate too much business and things sit too long. Not enough business and you have to turn customers away. It's an unenviable tightrope walk for sure, but one that the owners of this young truck seem well aware of mastering through social media feedback, customer interaction and experimentation with their hours and output.

There's a lot of love put into this food, and the service is quick and affable when everything syncs up.

Case in point: The \$6 Scotch egg (or Squatch egg, as the menu slyly references Bigfoot) was a perfect egg redemption. The panko exterior was crispy, the house-made sausage packed around the perfectly cooked egg — rested to about one degree south of hard-boiled — was juicy and flavorful. The real kicker was the homemade mustard sauce, known as Bucket Sauce, that was laced with peach and jalapeño

jam (regular deli mustard is also available). While jalapeño can certainly heat things up, the application here was subtle, with the peach bringing out the fruitier aspects of the pepper. Any punch is delivered by the Dijon base.

Obviously, this isn't the lightest fare. Any one of these pasties could easily crush nearly half a dozen Hot Pockets just by sitting on them. Unless you are bringing a dockworker's appetite to the table, you could probably squeeze two meals out of any pasty, or split one if you and your lunch date are simpatico.

Depending on the filling ingredients, they do reheat quite well in a 375-degree oven wrapped in foil to prevent additional browning. A recent experiment with a Slater came out piping hot — no worse for wear. This is a good possibility to consider for an easy weeknight dinner for two as Bucket Bites continues to operate on shorter, somewhat irregular winter hours. (I would certainly recommend checking their Facebook page, which they update regularly on hours and sell-outs.)

The Slater was my favorite pasty. The ground beef and pork lent their natural juiciness to the filling, keeping the potatoes moist. Again, the smoked cheddar was more of an extra than an ensemble player, but the smoky notes were present. I'm not sure I would have recognized the peperoncinis if they had not been listed on the menu.

Pairing this with a nice tangy and crispy coleslaw was a good move. The weightless, bright dressing was a good contrast to the heavy pastry. But, again, the real star was the side of beef gravy. Rich, tangy and with just the right consistency, this gravy deserves to be bottled, sold and revered.

Bucket Bites is a welcome and unique addition to Astoria's food truck scene that still needs a bit of breadth to figure out the timing and flow of its service hours. Don't miss the gravies, sauces and sides, and keep in mind the filling ingredients and their time out-of-oven when deciding on a pasty.

Bucket Bites also bakes a variety of sweets, including cream-filled whoopie pies, but I was always too stuffed to get there. **cw**