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## TIDES & TABLES: Terra Cotta Café - better than buried treasure

By **LORI MCKEAN** - Photos by **ALEX PAJUNAS**  
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The swordfish steak, served at the Terra Cotta Café in Manzanita, is topped with a wasabi teriyaki glaze.



David and Jane Gillis, from Manzanita, wrap up dinner at the Terra Cotta Café with a slice of tiramisu.

wines. "I'm a champagne chick and I love white wine," says Sandy, "but Harvey really has the palate for wines and he loves red wine." To assemble his small but very refined wine list, Harvey relies on four or more distributors. The list features wines from Oregon, Washington and California, as well as wine from Argentina, France, New Zealand, South Africa and Chile. As your sommelier, Harvey is happy to suggest wine and food pairings.

Sandy is the chef and she has taken comfort food to new levels. For example, I have always loved my mom's fried pork chops with applesauce. At Terra Cotta, Sandy kicks it up a notch by serving a grilled-to-order, two-inch thick (bone-in) French cut pork chop topped with curried sautéed apples. With complex charred flavors from the grill, the pork chop was perfectly cooked (medium rare). The curried apples added a spicy sweetness - like chutney. Roasted new potatoes and al dente sautéed vegetables on the side rounded out the dish nicely. Sandy uses only the freshest ingredients she can find and, whenever possible, buys locally.

Dinner one night began with warm braided fresh breadsticks and an appetizer of savory mushroom caps filled with fresh Dungeness crab, Boursin and ricotta cheese. An Anthony Dell pinot gris, with notes of fresh pears and crisp minerals,

Legend holds that treasure from a Spanish galleon still lies buried on the southwest flank of Neahkahnie Mountain.

Treasure hunters have searched in vain for many years to find it. While they are busy looking for gold and jewels, I found a treasure of my own at the base of Neahkanie, in Manzanita. The Terra Cotta Café, owned by Sandy and Harvey Sturm, is a gem.

Attention to detail is evident in all phases of this intimate nine-table restaurant. Soft pink lighting (highlighted with candlelight), crisply starched tablecloths, polished silverware and soft jazz all contribute to an air of romance. Even the women's bathroom is luxurious - with artwork and scented candles.

The Sturms opened the Terra Cotta Café on a whirlwind, just nine days before Mother's Day, in 2003 - one of the busiest dining days of the year. They had previously lived in Arizona and drew inspiration for the name of their café from the region's red soil, tiles and pottery. During the '80s and '90s, the Sturms traveled in their RV to California's Napa Valley each fall, where they participated in the wine crush. During these trips, they both acquired a love and knowledge of fine

**Terra Cotta Café**  
**Four stars (out of five)**  
**725 Manzanita Ave.,**  
**Manzanita**  
**(503) 368-3700**

**Winter hours:** 5 to 9 p.m.  
Wednesdays through Saturdays.

**Prices:** Moderate to expensive (portions are generous).

**Service:** Exceptional and informative.

**Kid-friendly:** No one under the age of 21 admitted.

**Vegetarian options:** There are several options, mainly salads. Upon request, chef Sandy is happy to cook special dishes for vegetarians and vegans. All dishes are served with house salad or soup and a choice of rice or potatoes.

**Reservations:** Highly recommended.

Classic cocktails, wine by the glass and bottle and micro brews are available.

provided the perfect balance.

One of Sandy's signature dishes is a salad "carousel," which gives diners a choice of toppings for the house salad. Toppings include house-made spiced pecans, Parmesan cheese, green onions, tomatoes, dried cranberries, blue cheese and sunflower seeds, among others. House-made blue cheese and Thousand Island dressings are standouts. The salad greens were brilliantly fresh and crisp, as were the greens for the Caesar salad. Unfortunately, I am a purist when it comes to Caesar salad. I like a traditional Caesar made with whole baby romaine leaves, anchovies, lime juice and homemade croutons. This didn't cut it for me. The chopped lettuce was great; but the dressing didn't resemble a traditional Caesar, and instead of croutons, it came with a side of two cheese-topped crostini. While very tasty, I wouldn't call it a Caesar. Mushroom soup was rich and flavorful, with house-made bread on the side for dipping.

When Harvey worked as a young fireman (a "boot") in Arizona, one of his duties was to cook dinner for the crew. He came up with "spaghetti and meatball" - a fist-sized meatball smothered in an aromatic red meat sauce tossed with spaghetti. Spicy, rich and seasoned with fragrant oregano, this was a standout. A hearty red Septima Tempranillo wine from Argentina, with notes of bell peppers, tomato and berries, was a great match with the spaghetti and the aforementioned grilled pork chop.

Halibut en Papillote (pan seared halibut fillet cooked in a parchment packet filled with spinach, mushrooms, Parmesan, lemon and herbs) was super fresh and perfectly cooked. Served in an earthenware casserole, chicken breast stuffed with spinach, blue cheese and caramelized onions delighted several of my dining companions.

Desserts, baked fresh daily by Sandy, are outstanding. If you have a chance, try the five-layered, feather-light tiramisu. Recommended as a side is a port-like cabernet filtered over cocoa beans.

Owners and chefs Sandy and Harvey Sturm say their motto is to "take the ordinary and make it taste extraordinary." They do just that, by starting with the freshest ingredients they can find and spicing them with thoughtfulness and passion.

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