

Overnight in Centralia

Quaint town offers ambience, antiques, good food Story & photos by Tracy Beard



Visiting a small town may seem uneventful and even uninteresting. But if you look hard and take time to speak to one or more of the locals, you may find hidden gems well worth exploring. Centralia, Washington, located just off Interstate 5 at Exit 81, offers some exciting dining opportunities, quaint shops, and a couple of unique hotel options for a quick overnight getaway.

of kalamata olives, mozzarella, cherry tomatoes, and pickled onion slices. Chef Eckerson insisted we try the poke, which consisted of delicious fresh raw tuna, sticky sushi rice, creamy avocado, crunchy cucumber, and a drizzle of spicy wasabi.

Kaci, a licensed massage practitioner and owner of The Keysar Center of Massage, told us about a few great spas to visit. She said if you are looking for an unprecedented deep-tissue or relaxation massage, she's got you covered. If you want to experience an amazing facial, go to Beautiful Skin. Get the 90-minute Thai Coconut Facial from owner Kim Chase. "You kind of just float out of there," Kaci said.

Make it a Pub Crawl

If a pub crawl is your thing, Kaci suggested the following itinerary: Begin your crawl at the Olympic Club with a Lovely Margarita. Then head over to the Hub Bar and Grill and enjoy a \$4 drink with a generous pour, a dollar-and-a-half slider and hand-cut fries. Next, walk over to the Tower for a drink and finish off at The Branch Bar & Public Room. If you can wait until the spring of 2018, plan to spend time at the Fox Theater.

The Fox Theater, built in the 1930s, is currently under restoration, with

plans for a 1000-seat auditorium under way. When completed, the art deco performing arts center will serve all of Southwest Washington. Future attendees are encouraged to buy a seat to help support the preservation and restoration of the building, and the 2018 calendar will be filled with movies, musicals, plays and other events for the public to choose from and enjoy.



After finishing the appetizers, Laura and I headed over to Boccata, a Mediterranean restaurant on Tower Avenue. Darin Harris, owner and chef at Boccata, crafts inventive food with originations from Italy, Greece, and other European countries. My Caesar salad was crisp and flavorful with just the right amount of dressing, and Laura's Greek salad, with cold crisp cucumbers, salty kalamata olives, and tangy feta cheese, sported a light and tasty dressing.

Beautiful "budino"

I ordered the entrée special of the day, a room-temperature penne pasta salad adorned with goat cheese, raw tomatoes, spinach, and prosciutto. Laura ordered the succulent lamb meatballs accompanied with tzatziki sauce. Couscous decorated the bottom of the plate, and the house Pinot Gris paired perfectly with both dishes.

For a grand finale, Dillan, a congenial Boccata employee, served us budino (budino is the Italian word for custard



or pudding). The budino, a light yet rich slice of chocolate decadence, was served with a strawberry puree and whipped cream. Laura and I determined earlier in the evening to share a dessert, but soon regretted that resolution, as the dessert was so phenomenal we wished we had ordered two.

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There are a few unique options for overnight stays in Centralia, but I highly recommend a night or two at the Central Square Grand Hotel (at right). Lovingly renovated by Neil and Jody White, this 1920s hotel offers guests pleasing amenities in a vintage setting. The Whites used characteristic materials to renovate and redecorate the building and rebuilt the architectural details in the style of the roaring 1920s.

The hotel is located in central downtown and boasts 16 distinctive guest rooms. Reminiscent of the era, many bathrooms have marble showers or claw-foot tubs, allowing guests to revel in some of the luxuries of days



gone by. Rooms do not come with TVs, giving guests the opportunity to step back in time and participate in more relaxing activities, like old-fashioned conversation, reading, or writing. The renovated hotel does, however, offer several modern conveniences like indoor plumbing, electricity, and Wi-Fi.



Your head may spin, looking at all the desserts

Berry Fields Cafe is connected to the first floor of the hotel. This quaint, cozy cafe offers a variety of breakfast and lunch items. A spinning glass display case rotates continuously showing off a multitude of desserts to choose from. However, on a hot day I recommend the Café Float, a traditional root beer float loaded with scrumptious vanilla ice cream.

Make plans soon for a trip to Centralia — it has something for everyone.

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Vancouver resident Tracy Beard loves food, wine, exploring solo and with friends and family. She writes travel and adventure stories for several publications. Read more about her at tracybeardwrites.com.



Shoppers of all types are destined to find interesting treasures. If shopping is not on the top of your interest list, however, there are other gratifying ways to spend an afternoon.

Overlooking the park

My friend, Laura, and I met up with Centralia local Kaci Jones at The Branch Bar & Public Room, located inside the Central Square Grand Ballroom & Hotel. The Branch is owned and operated by Chris Bruce and Joel Wall. This sophisticated but approachable bar is the perfect place for an after-work drink, appetizer, or dinner. The newly opened Branch Terrace, also known as the Parkview Terrace, is located on the second floor of the hotel and overlooks George Washington Park. The terrace, with its iron rails and umbrella tables, is an ideal place to spend a summer or early fall evening outside with a cocktail and friends (photo, above).



Joel manned the bar that night and whipped up both classic and one-of-a-kind martinis. My lemon drop was bright, tart, and balanced with just the right amount of sweetness from the sugared rim. Laura imbibed a classic Manhattan, and Kaci gave free reign to Joel, who surprised her with a key-lime-pie martini. The pale green, spirited drink tasted exactly like a slice of chilled key lime pie.

We ordered the arctic char appetizer and were delighted with the fish, toasted pita, dill cream cheese, and the small Greek salad



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