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Seattle to Portland: Breakfast @ The Spar

This is the second part of a series that follows the [Group Health Seattle to Portland Bicycle Classic](#) along its route, and explores the history and transformation of the Pacific Northwest through the communities and stops along the way. See [here](#) for part 1.

As 7:30 a.m. rolled around, we were ready for breakfast and tired of slowly following the STP riders through Kent, so we made our way back to I-5 and headed south to the first of two stops that took us away from the bicyclists' course.

[The Spar Cafe and Cigar Bar](#) opened its doors for the first time in June of 1935, in downtown Olympia at 114 Fourth Ave. E. It was designed by architect Joseph Wohleb, who had a hand in a number of prominent buildings in and around Olympia from the mid-teens to the 1930s, including the Olympia Carnegie Library and the Old Thurston County Courthouse. In the beginning, it was a hang-out for influential locals, primarily lumber and railroad types sitting around, puffing cigars from the healthily stocked humidors behind the bar. Later, it became a meeting spot for the state government well-to-dos, and through the early 2000s was still known as "the best breakfast to be had south of Seattle." Ten years after it opened, it was acquired by the McWain family, two generations of whom ran the bar until Alan McWain sold it in 2006, [telling the Puget Sound Business Journal](#) that the indoor smoking ban "made me lose \$33,000 a month in sales."

The Spar is still open today by virtue of the [McMenamin brothers](#), the Portland-based microbrewing powerhouse. Mike McMenamin, the oldest of three siblings (his younger brother is a partner in McMenamins) earned his chops at a sub shop in Corvallis while attending Oregon State University, and returned to Portland in the mid-1970s to found a pub with some buddies from college. (A young Josh Feit [wrote a nice piece on McMenamins](#) in *Willamette Week* back in 1998.) It and a wine distribution venture failed, but in the early 1980s, a hippie bar he opened in Southeast Portland called the Barley Mill caught on, and by 1985, working with a team of microbrewers, Mike McMenamin & co. got the state of Oregon to overturn a ban on brewpubs stretching back to Prohibition, a crucial lifeline to the fledgling microbrew movement. Brewpubs solved a crucial business problem for brewers, by allowing them to go direct to consumer without the trouble of bottling and distribution, a hurdle to small batch brewers, particularly in the era before it was common to keep microbrews on tap in bars.



The Spar Cafe, at 114 Fourth Ave. E., Olympia, Wa.



Our personal lives are actually strangely intertwined with the development of McMenamins as well. This Seattlester's mother and step-father actually *met* at the Greenway Pub in Tigard, Oregon, one of their first, opened around 1984. Our mother was young when she had us and was working as a hairdresser near by, and our step-father was even younger, not actually 21 yet, but he'd done something to help the bartenders when they opened the pub—he worked at the Scamp's pet store in the same strip-mall—so he could get in for an after-work beer. Perhaps unsurprisingly, their rocky marriage was marked by alcohol abuse, but we've never thought to hold that against McMenamins. As a child, we used to love going there for lunch (they've always been family friendly) because they were about the last place on earth that still sold curly fries. And in college, as we and our friends all turned 21, inevitably one of our first legal trips to the pub would land us at a McMenamins in Eugene or Portland.

But these days McMenamins is in a very different place. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that they're one of the largest brewpub chains in the country, they've been left in the dust by the microbrew movement they helped launch. The flagship Terminator Stout, for instance, can't hold a candle to the likes of [North Coast's Old Rasputin Imperial Stout](#). As [Seattlest Geoff](#), our resident beer expert, put it: "I'd put their normal lineup of beers right up there with [Rock](#)

[Bottom](#)'s normal lineup (not a compliment). But some of their seasonal and specialty release beers have been good...seems like when they try they can make the good stuff, but they're happy slinging mediocre beers most of the time. I love the concept of the business and their hotels etc., but I never go out of my way to drink there in Seattle."

Indeed, while other breweries have concentrated on market expansion by bottling and distributing, McMenamins went into real estate. Of their more than 50 current locations, [nine \(including the Spar\) are on the Registry of Historical Places](#). And they're not all brewpubs: the [Crystal Ballroom](#) is one of Portland's premier rock clubs, and in addition to a smattering of other music venues and movie theaters, they operate several hotel-resorts, including the [Kennedy School](#) in Portland and the [Olympic Club](#) in Centralia.

Planning our STP trip with Aron and David months before, our first thought was to stay at either the one or the other for the night, but by late winter both were fully booked for the STP. Aron and Harrison, who did the STP in two days and spent the night in Centralia, had dinner at the Olympic Club and enjoyed it. As Aron [put it on his blog](#): "I've eaten at many a McMenamins, but the attentiveness of the staff here was just wonderful, and it deserves special mention. If you decide you need to stay in Centralia, it's quite worth it, at least from the restaurant angle (can't speak to the other)."

So McMenamins has moved beyond merely being brewers and become preservationists of Northwest culture, but at the same time it's a Coca-colonization, a blandness creep that overwrites the local color with the McMenamins brand, like a Northwest-themed Fadó. According [The Weekly Volcano](#), McMenamins spent \$300,000 restoring the Spar to its original design before reopening it in January of 2007. But at the same time it's become distinctively "McMenamins," a style which is itself old-fashioned NW kitsch, mixed with a touch of '60s psychedelic kitsch.

When we arrived for breakfast around 8:15 a.m., we found ourselves standing in a quiet bar with indie rock playing. Photos of the Spar's early days share wall space with concert posters for the Decemberists. The "best breakfast south of Seattle" has been reduced to a small menu of basic items—we had a plate of hashbrowns, eggs and a pair of sausage links with a slice of toasted French bread, while our partner had a Monte Cristo. Not what we were expecting; we had in mind some sort of Olympia Five Point, and indeed, for some reason the old, pre-McMenamins [Spar webpage](#) is up, advertising a healthy menu of country fried steak and eggs, Polish sausage and eggs, and crab benedict, all for the bottom-of-the-barrel prices we would have expected.

So McMenamins preserves and erases at the same time; the building and the architecture are still there, restored to their original specs like a collector car, but it's a sort of a pastiche, a reference to a storied past that's being overwritten by a retro-crazed present. And nothing speaks more to that than the humidior behind the bar. The 25-foot rule prevents customers from smoking even out front, so what's the point? The humidior itself is just another antique showpiece, the tobacco slowly aging away. Within the last week, an attempt to create a narrow exception to the smoking bans for cigar bars and private clubs fell short of the required signatures to make the ballot. According to [The Olympian](#), the initiative's sponsor plans to ask the legislature to permit the

exception in January. Perhaps someday the fat-cats down in Olympia will once again make their deals in a smoke-filled Spar Cafe. But it sadly seems unlikely.

By [Jeremy M. Barker](#)