

## Haute Cuisine, American Style

*At The Inn at Little Washington in rural Virginia, food lovers will enjoy a meal worth splurging on.*

There aren't many inns that can claim status as a bucket-list destination meriting its own listing in Patricia Schultz's *1000 Places to See Before You Die*. But then again, there aren't many like The Inn at Little Washington, a world-renowned restaurant and 24-room inn owned and operated by chef Patrick O'Connell.

Both the inn and its restaurant have earned AAA Five Diamond status a record 26 years in a row. And Zagat's Washington, D.C., survey has repeatedly recognized the inn as the top restaurant in the Nation's Capital—despite its location some 70 miles outside D.C. in tiny Washington, Virginia (population: 150).

What's all the more impressive is that O'Connell is a completely self-taught chef. He grew up in Prince George's County, Maryland, working in burger-and-fries joints. That experience and traditional home cooking formed his early estimation of what food could be. But that view changed when the then-20-year-old O'Connell spent a year in Europe being exposed to the impressive food culture on the continent. In Europe, and particularly France, food demanded reverence, and a chef was considered an artist. O'Connell came back determined to make a career as a restaurateur.

"In those days [the early '70s] in America, restaurants were disreputable places...[that] reminded you of deep-



Chef Patrick O'Connell

PHOTO BY GORDON BEALL

fryers and maraschino cherries and rough characters, so [my] parents were not at all thrilled with the idea of their offspring taking up a career [as a chef]. They didn't even approve of working at a restaurant. It was kind of like joining the circus," O'Connell says. Still, he forged ahead.

In 1978, after several years as a successful caterer, O'Connell opened The Inn at Little Washington in two rented rooms in a converted gas station. It was a far cry from the multiple buildings and elegant yet whimsical décor of today's inn, where sumptuous William Morris-inspired wall coverings and fabrics mix with touches like the Monkey Bar, whose walls are covered with scenes of monkeys dressed in human attire and plush monkeys are strewn about. (O'Connell's third book, *The Inn at Little Washington: A Magnificent Obsession*, set for release in April, focuses on the history and interior design of the inn.)

Within weeks of the restaurant's opening, a review appeared in the now-defunct *Washington Star* declaring its food the best within a 150-mile radius of D.C., and diners began to flock from the Nation's Capital. When *New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne in 1985 called O'Connell's *foie gras* sauté with black-eyed peas vinaigrette "one of the

best things I ever put in my mouth"—well, the deal was sealed.

O'Connell had taught himself to cook using Julia Child's cookbooks, and in the early days, the restaurant's cuisine reflected the then-prevailing foodie opinion that only French cuisine could be *haute cuisine*. But it wasn't French cooking that O'Connell aspired to present. "The goal was to ultimately celebrate the American flavor palate and the food memories that I had grown up with—and elevate those by taking the clunky bits out and distilling them into a new dimension," O'Connell says. His cooking evolved, and he coined the term "refined American cuisine" to describe it.

Not that O'Connell takes himself too seriously. His sartorial trademarks are his Dalmatian-print pants and matching apron, and he has even given in to letting guests see the colorful Nike sneakers he wears for comfort and amusement (which include a pair in shades of electric pink and purple).

Dinner at the Inn at Little Washington commences with popcorn served in a small cinema-style red-and-white striped container. The truffle-shaved popcorn announces that dining at the inn should be fun, not stuffy. It's also a nod to O'Connell's view that dining is akin to improv theater, with the guests

**THE INN AT LITTLE WASHINGTON**  
448 MAIN STREET  
WASHINGTON, VA 22747  
540/675-3800  
[THEINNATLITTLEWASHINGTON.COM](http://THEINNATLITTLEWASHINGTON.COM)

in the starring role. “For me, it’s always been more fascinating than the theater in that there’s a certain element of unpredictability,” says O’Connell, who studied theater at Catholic University. “And then you have, of course, behind the scenes—backstage—and front of the house, as you do in the theater. Everybody is trying to present the illusion, and the hard-core reality is taking place behind it all. So it’s like living two lives simultaneously. And for me, it’s a high every night.”

While O’Connell and his kitchen staff are working behind the curtain, onstage the knowledgeable and friendly wait staff is serving up fare from three different eight-course, prix-fixe *cartes du jour*, with individual courses that can be mixed and matched. The Enduring Classics menu includes favorite offerings from the inn’s three decades, dishes such as “pepper-crusting tuna pretending to be filet mignon, capped with seared duck *foie gras* on charred onions and burgundy butter sauce,” which debuted in 1985. The Menu of the Moment features more recently created dishes like “thinly shaved Australian Wagyu beef shabu-shabu,” introduced in 2011, whereas the Vegetarian Creations menu might consist of selections along the lines of “three-cheese cannelloni with Sicilian eggplant and tomato sauce.”

Guests are not surprised to learn that O’Connell has raked in the awards over the years, including being honored as a James Beard Best Chef and a Relais & Châteaux Grand Chef. He’s cooked for senators, Supreme Court justices and presidents, movie stars and royalty—even his esteemed Julia Child. But every diner is special to O’Connell and treated as such by the staff; for ultimately, O’Connell says, he wants his customers to feel not as if they’ve been at a restaurant or a hotel, but as if they’ve been a guest at a country estate—and he their gracious host.

—Theresa Gawlas Medoff



PHOTO BY TIM TURNER

## MACARONI AND CHEESE WITH VIRGINIA COUNTRY HAM

### INGREDIENTS

- ¾ cup macaroni or your favorite tubular pasta
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon minced shallots
- 2 cups heavy cream
- ½ cup freshly grated aged Gouda cheese
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- Pinch freshly grated nutmeg
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

### GARNISHES

- 2 slices Virginia country ham, finely julienned
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped chives
- White truffle (optional)

### INSTRUCTIONS

In a large pot, bring 4 quarts of salted water to a boil. Add the macaroni, and cook until the pasta is half-done (the interior will be slightly raw). Drain the pasta, and place it in a small bowl. Add the olive oil, and toss to keep the macaroni from sticking together. Allow it to cool. This can be done the day before and kept in the refrigerator until needed.

In a 4-quart saucepan over medium-low heat, melt the butter. Add the garlic and shallots, and sweat for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, being careful not to brown them. Add the cream, bring to a rapid boil and then reduce the heat to a simmer. Cook, stirring, until the cream has reduced by one-quarter and it coats the back of a spoon.

Whisk in the grated cheeses, and cook for a minute or so until the cheese is melted and the mixture is smooth. Season with nutmeg, salt and pepper. Remove from the heat, and pass through a fine strainer (optional). (At this point, the sauce can be refrigerated for a day or two.) Return the cheese sauce to the pan over low heat, and add the already cooked macaroni.

Simmer for a minute or two to make sure the pasta is warmed through.

### TO SERVE

Spoon about ½ cup of the pasta in the center of 4 warmed plates. Ladle 1 or 2 tablespoons of the cheese sauce around the plate. Garnish each portion with the julienned ham and chopped chives. If you like, white truffle can be shaved on the macaroni at the table.

**SERVES 4 TO 6**