

Big truffle in Little Washington

Meet Patrick O'Connell, chef-proprietor, Inn at Little Washington.



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Chef and author [Patrick O'Connell](#), who helped build the historic [Inn at Little Washington](#) into the twice-Diamond-rated, James Beard award-winner, doesn't believe in one-word answers or delineating favorites — he's far too fluid for that. He recoils at the “chef” label, and his favorite foods change every 10 minutes. What hasn't changed? His restaurant's nearly 40-year renown.

What got you into food? Food has a very primal, primitive meaning for many people, myself included. And I think I began to understand the mysticism surrounding food at a very early age with the story of “Little Red Riding Hood.” And how food could be used as a powerful tool of manipulation and self-preservation. It is directly connected to our survival. I didn't know I was a food person or that my life would revolve around food but, with that story and a grandmother who was a marvelous cook who could make something out of nothing, I regarded the preparation of food as kind of an act of magic. So when she would take a small piece of liver and make a rice casserole for 12 people and side dishes from fallen apples that were in her backyard, it all seemed like a magic act to me. I became fascinated with the process of transformation, of taking something and altering its nature. And having that connected to one's survival is a very powerful life force.

What did you want to be when you grew up? Probably a king.

Next big goal: Yes, we have goal after goal after goal after goal. I'm working on a memoir now. We're doing a docuseries, which is exciting — we've had a film crew here for several weeks. I'm going to Cuba next week to talk to officials about how I might participate in a hospitality and culinary program there, which would help them bring a quality tourist who would help preserve and protect Cuban heritage. There is an interesting agricultural component in order to have a great restaurant — you have to have great product to work with — so you also have to be able to teach and motivate people to grow great crops. So we have a farmer we've worked with who travels all over the world, working with various countries with their agricultural programs. And the remarkable thing about Cuba is, for 54 years, no pesticides were introduced. So it's a natural state of organic farming, which needs to be preserved and not taken over by agribusiness. I have not yet had the pleasure of visiting, but I'm looking forward to that and seeing where it might evolve. We are also doing a café here in Little Washington, and the plans are in front of me, and again, we are transforming a garage — the building that houses the Inn was at one time a gas station. So this building across the street from us was also a gas station. It ties into my love of magic and transformation to supplant the horrible history with the wonderful one. And so I just published a book called, "A Magnificent Obsession," which is about the process of the Inn's transformation and the collaborative process of working with other talented artists and evolving the place into its current state.

What one word would you use to describe yourself? I don't like the idea of reduction. I like the idea of expansion. I don't like one-word descriptions of anything. I think it takes away from the mystery and the depth. So I'd like people to describe me any way they wish to and not worry about describing myself. So I've had the same issue with labels; I don't enjoy being reduced to being called "a chef" or "a cook." I think it's limiting and people should avoid them at all costs. The same with what kind of food we prepare — people want it reduced to French, Italian, German, whatever one word because that's all they can handle. And then they attach all their preconceptions onto that word. So it's changing moment to moment, who I am and who I'm evolving into. And it's fluid. So if you had to go for a word, fluid might work. I have a fluid personality — I'm flowing in and out. And watching out for rough edges and dangerous beings.

Hardest lesson learned: There are many lessons in the course of a day. In high school, I had an algebra teacher. I hated math, I hated science, I hated school, I hated artificial intelligence, I hated learning as it was presented, and I hated packaged learning. And I wrote it all off as not relevant to who I was. But one day, the algebra teacher had an insight and that is: If you were trying to solve a problem and you were going about it methodically in a logical way but you weren't reaching a solution and it wasn't working, simply try the opposite. And I've felt that that's good advice. In the process of facing challenges and problem-solving, you often tend to be focused on a process or solution and when you give that up and go in an opposite direction, sometimes the opposite works. So the idea of opposites and juxtapositions fascinates me. While one thing might be true, the opposite might also be true. I don't see things in terms of absolute. Oftentimes, the things or decisions you dread most or that seem the most ominous turn out to be later inconsequential.

What are you like to work for? You would have to ask them. I would say, while I don't like reduction, intense might be a suitable adjective here. However, it's a quiet, focused intensity. And it's relieved by humor. So while I take the work very seriously, I don't take myself overseriously. But we do have a little expression: "Come on guys, it's not like it's life or death. It's much more important than that." And that's our everyday mantra. Getting someone's dinner exactly right is much more important than life or death.

What's it like on a busy night? When the entire operation, like on a busy Saturday night, is really at full adrenaline pitch, there is a kind of runner's high that everyone is experiencing. And you're, as we say, "in the zone." And it's a beautiful feeling. There is no separation between yourself and the guy on either side of you or between the kitchen and the dining room. Everybody is just going full-bore as sort of one unit and the guests receiving and seeing that too.

What's the biggest misconception about the restaurant industry? Well, I think there has always been, and probably always will be, a double standard between the hospitality business and every other business. In the hospitality business, every single individual is expected to be personable, charming, warm, friendly, engaging, smiling, delightful, up, ready, willing and happy to deal with whatever issues, requests or requirements a guest may have at any moment. And somehow that doesn't transfer over into the expectations we have for other businesses or companies. So right now, I'm working with the medical profession and giving lectures, talks and seminars in how they can learn from the standards that we adhere to, to actually improve their role and the role of their auxiliary staff as healers. It's very exciting because in the ultimate potential of what we do in the hospitality world, we are, in fact, healers and we enhance guests' self-esteem. We make them feel that life is worth living, we take them to a place that is rarefied and wonderful without flaw that they can use as a reference point to return to. So we make magic. And the point is that almost any other business is also in the service profession. They just haven't figured that out yet.

Favorite comfort food: Again, as a fluid person, that may be changing every 10 minutes. So the trick in the course of a day, a week, a year, is that any moment finding the precise thing that rings your bell then. It's continually changing and sometimes you don't know exactly what it is. So at any moment, at any day, whether you've eaten or haven't eaten in two days, there is a morsel of food, a dish that is perfect; you just have to figure out what that is. It's much easier for me figuring it out for someone else than it is for myself. So it isn't one thing that always makes me happy. It's continually changing.

Do you have a favorite dish to make? How can we erase this misconception that what do you do is like breathing? Or does a singer have a favorite song? Does a storyteller have a favorite story? It's all one. It is the process of doing something, so what you enjoy most is something that encapsulates the moment or something that is exciting now. So it's continuously changing.

Is there a dish that you haven't made yet? Oh, every day is unknown territory. As one old French chef said, "You wake up in the morning after doing it for 30 years and you think, 'Some days there's absolutely nothing left to learn,' and you wake up the next day and you think, 'I know absolutely nothing.'" So every day is a clean slate and that's part of the joy and mystery of

cooking because you have to make your magic over and over and over again. And you never arrive; the public is insatiable. People are forever hungry. There is no completion to the work.

What's your junk food habit? I'm not a food snob but I like very simple, very healthy, very wonderful foods. I like to eat in the season. I like to hang over the sink and eat a perfect peach. I like to eat a perfect tomato. I like to eat it out of my hands. I either like one extreme or the other — I like to eat and devour like an animal or I like to have a very civilized, exquisite, magnificent, perfectly served, beautifully executed dinner in a glorious restaurant. So I wouldn't mind going in the woods and eating on all fours. Or sometimes I just go out in the garden and stuff things into my mouth. So a couple of weeks ago, we had a little party and we butchered a bull at José Andrés' house, and we all drank the bull blood. Shots of bull blood were very satisfying to the primal sense of who we all are.

Some of the most famous people you have served: Well, I don't know how one rates "most famous," but I think Queen Elizabeth is probably up there in terms of general international fame. And we were very flattered that Barbra Streisand decided to pay us a visit and come for lunch, even though we weren't open for lunch. I was coming back from a trip and one of the reservationists called me and said, "Barbra Streisand is coming for lunch tomorrow." And I said, "That's a good one. You got any others?" And she said, "I'm serious." And I said, "Preposterous. We're not open for lunch, did you tell her that?" And she said, "We tried to, but it was President Clinton who called for her. And when I told him we weren't open for lunch, he said, 'So much the better.'"

What do you think is the next big food trend? I would hope that we are moving toward people being able to evaluate and determine and decide for themselves what they like and what they don't like and what sort of restaurants and cuisines they can relate to and enjoy without being dictated to by the media mafia, who essentially has to fabricate what's next and what's new. I think what we're seeing quietly taking place is that the importance of restaurants is increasing enormously because there is very little left in the culture that people can trust. Food is the one aspect of life that cannot lie. You put it in your mouth and it's either good or it's bad. And you have to trust your own taste buds. You have to know if you like it or you don't like it.

What we should know about fine dining: If there is one enormous misconception, it is that expensive restaurants don't offer good value. In actuality, they may very well offer a much better value than fast-food chains. A fast-food chain may buy its Coke syrup for 9 cents and charge you \$2.89, mostly for the ice. A great restaurant will have wine that they've cellared for 25 years. We have a staff of 140 here to deal with every single aspect. We have a 24-hour kitchen with 36 people working. We're baking all the bread, all the croissants, making all the ice creams, the chocolates with the most expensive and greatest ingredients in the world. We have our own farm, our own farmer, all of those things make the cost of putting the things on the table much greater than the public could very possibly imagine. So the more the public, and particularly the more journalists, can learn about what goes into the process, the greater appreciation they will have for the value.

Your favorite restaurant: James Beard, who was the famous food writer whose house is now the James Beard Foundation center, was asked that question once and he said, “The best restaurant is where they know you.” You do find that if you frequent a place or they do know you, a special bond begins to develop. And you’re relaxed, they’re relaxed, they want to do their best for you. The problem these days is that people are being motivated to go to a different restaurant every week and not frequent the same places. There is a lot of advantage in choosing a restaurant or a wine, which is your place or your wine, and making it part of your life. When traveling, I used to go to a little vacation spot, and I tried to go to all of the restaurants. And then I thought, “You know what, I’m going to try something different. I’m going to go to the same restaurant every night if I like it and if it’s good.” And it just got better and better. And so I have four or five in D.C. that I frequent and I just slide in and I feel good, they feel good and the food gets better and better. So I recommend that to people: to choose a favorite hangout that you like and do them the honor of frequenting it.

What do most people not know about you? Well, I hope a lot. And I’d like to keep it that way.

Personality in high school: That was so far ago (laughs). In the yearbook, which is supposed to encapsulate your personality, I recall a phrase about me that said “daringly and infectiously creative. A man of words and stuff.” So that seems to still work for me. If someone tells me something is impossible, that for me is the greatest challenge, to prove that it is possible. It’s great fuel for me to be told what I can’t have or what I can’t do or what won’t work. I get a charge out of displaying that it can be done.

Favorite place anywhere in the world: We have a meadow on the property, which the staff calls a “field of dreams.” And it has a little perimeter path which takes you to our vegetable garden and to the sheep pasture. You see the llamas, and you walk past our cherry orchard and the distance of the rolling hills and little mountains of the Blue Ridge. It’s extremely peaceful and every night, I escape out of the kitchen for my four-minute walk. I just give them the signal that I’m going out. I like dusk — that’s my favorite time of evening, just as the sun is almost completely down. And I take my walk in the field of dreams and I talk to all the trees and demand that they grow faster. I love trees. Yesterday I went to Mount Vernon to look at the trees and to see a 200-year-old tree gives me great pleasure, especially when it’s perfectly formed and the bark is gorgeous. I’m planting trees that will be at their maturity in 200 years, and that’s giving me some pleasure, also in the field of dreams.

Pet peeve: Any kind of sloppiness. It drives me absolutely crazy. It’s usually the tiniest of tiniest things. Crooked pictures, a burned-out lightbulb, a torn lampshade, a dead flower will all have the effect on me that maybe a flood or a forest fire would have on someone else.

Guilty pleasure: I don’t think any pleasure should be regarded as guilty. That trick was attempted to be laid on me early on by the nuns, and I fluidly swam right away from that. So I think the more pleasurable, the less guilt.

If you had \$1 million, you would: Say, “Is that all? What the hell can I do with that?”

What keeps you up at night? Thinking, ideas, writing emails of what needs to be done. So before I leave, I walk or drive through the town, and I note any burned-out lightbulbs or things that need attention, and I'm usually up late at night addressing those to our various departments and sending emails. Answering emails keeps me up also. But I love getting home and having that peaceful, quiet few hours before going to bed.

What would you do if not this? But I am doing this, and this is living. So if I were living, I would be doing this in some form or another.

The basics

- **Name:** [Patrick O'Connell](#), chef-proprietor, [Inn at Little Washington](#)
- **Age:** 69
- **Education:** Honorary doctorate, Johnson & Wales University. I went to various colleges, but one of my professors convinced me I should leave and educate myself. And that was wonderful advice.
- **Residence:** Town of Washington, Virginia
- **Family:** I have 140 staff members here, who are the best family anyone could hope for.
- **First job:** In a restaurant, one of the early carry-outs in Clinton. A joyous and wonderful experience.