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He remade H Street and Logan Circle. Now D.C. developer takes on a country town.

BY [JONATHAN O'CONNELL](#) June 6, 2014

It started 36 years ago, when a country boy with a taste for French cooking opened a restaurant in a former gas station on Middle Street in Washington, Va. The roast chicken with fresh tarragon and green beans went for \$4.95 the first week.

In the ensuing years, sometimes to the irritation of neighbors, Patrick O'Connell built an exquisite and unlikely culinary empire, the Inn at Little Washington. Senators, media moguls, business leaders and Hollywood stars came for a drive in the country and a \$500 meal at O'Connell's inn. Power brokers Alan Greenspan and Andrea Mitchell were married there in 1997, by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.



The Inn at Little Washington. (Photo by Jeffrey MacMillan)

D.C.'s elite began buying land, estates looking up at Shenandoah National Forest, 90 minutes from the capital. Big Washington had come to Little Washington, population 135, a place where there are no fast-food restaurants, chain hotels or stop lights but where you might find yourself at the gas station just outside of town standing behind a farmer and ahead of member of Congress.

Then D.C. developer Jim Abdo arrived and plotted a vision for Little Washington that was unimaginable when O'Connell opened his kitchen.

Having led the resurgence of Logan Circle and H Street Northeast, Abdo, with partners, has bought 10 buildings — paying \$2.6 million for half of Main street — in this corner of Rappahannock County, opening an inn of his own and plotting new restaurants, shops and attractions to fill the seven-block downtown.

After spending more than 20 years vacationing in the area, much of that time on an estate where friend and former D.C. Mayor Anthony A. Williams found solace sitting on a riding mower, cutting the property's expansive lawn, Abdo said couldn't understand why the Inn had been so successful but the tiny town "was literally going in the opposite direction."

"It was hollow, it was vacant, it was empty," Abdo said. "There was no pulse. And I thought to myself, I've been going into corridors with bigger problems than this. And I've also gone into corridors that didn't have a catalyst like the Inn at Little Washington. And why isn't that properly being leveraged?"

In the District, Abdo seized on neighborhoods earlier than others, asking skeptics to look past the crack vials, graffiti and prostitutes sashaying across the way.

Now he is asking investors to look past collapsing barns from the 1800s and the occasional kitchen appliance abandoned in a front yard.

Just as he once courted executives for Fresh Fields (now Whole Foods) and Caribou Coffee for Logan Circle, Abdo has arranged deals with Red Truck Bakery, furniture seller August Georges, D.C. chef Daniel O'Brien of Seasonal Pantry to relocate or reopen in Virginia's Washington.

His vision won two weighty endorsements, from O'Connell, sometimes referred to as "the Pope of American Cuisine," and the town's mayor, John Fox Sullivan, publisher at large at the parent of Atlantic Monthly and National Journal.

"I think more than ever city dwellers need a restorative escape, and they know it," O'Connell said.

"This is, I think, part of the discovery that Jim senses, that needs to be better understood," he added. "You don't just have to come out and have dinner. The world is here. It's a European-like exposure right here."

But just as Abdo's luxury condos prompted questions about urban transformation and the displacement of low-income residents, his plans here have begun a conversation about what kind of a town Washington, Va., wants to be. Today it is everything the sprawling, congested and often cookie-cutter D.C. suburbs are not — quaint, quiet and sincere.

There isn't any hurry to get anywhere because there's hardly anywhere to go. There will be soon. Can it bear the change?

As Sullivan, publisher of Washington political insight for 40 years, put it: "I love Starbucks, but if they wanted to open here, people would go ballistic."

A teenage George Washington surveyed the town in 1749, four decades before he selected a site 70 miles east for the nation's capital. The county seat for Rappahannock County has not changed dramatically since.

Zoning rules prevent the construction of subdivisions, strip malls and the like. The entire town is a historic district. There isn't a chain hotel for 20 miles and no stoplight in town — a point of pride.





Washington, Va., has a population of about 130 people. D.C. developer Jim Abdo has a vision for building the town into a restorative escape for D.C.'s elite.

Jeffrey MacMillan /For The Washington Post

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[View Photo Gallery – Jim Abdo, the man who led the resurgence of Logan Circle and H Street Northeast, is now investing in the tiny town of Washington, Va., hoping to remake it into a vibrant country tourist destination for D.C.'s elite.](#)

“I think that everybody is always a little afraid of change and nobody wants un-tempered growth,” said Susan Stoltzman, a nurse practitioner who lives in Washington with her husband. “I can’t ever picture a stop light on Main Street. Everyone goes so slow and knows everybody so they stop to talk to everybody.”

The town is still best known for the inn. O'Connell shot to international fame beginning in 1983 when New York Times food writer Marian Burros visited and wrote that her meal "was on a par with New York's best restaurants and more inventive than most of them."

Though O'Connell split with his original partner, over the past 25 years, he has enjoyed an unprecedented reign atop the lists of food critics' favorites. Rooms during weekends in peak season are often booked eight months in advance. "How does chef-owner Patrick O'Connell do it after all these decades?" Post food critic Tom Sietsema wrote in a 2013 dining guide. "I believe in magic."



On Good Friday, O'Connell opened the Parsonage, his newest expansion in a home built in the mid-1800s that is just across the way from the inn. He spent \$4 million to create just six rooms. All of the decor, including intricately designed wallpaper and handmade wooden columns, are made by locals and harken to a time when Americans made things out of wood, metal, glass and paper rather than plastic.

"When they are no longer making three-way bulbs and run out of wallpaper, I'll know it's time to quit," he said.

The accolades both for O'Connell's cuisine and the theatrical-like service made the Inn a destination. Dinner for two can run over \$1,000 and a room in the inn, depending on which of the restored country homes and rooms one chooses, ranges from \$400 to over \$3,000 for the presidential suite.



O'Connell was living on a farm when he chose Washington for his restaurant.

"This, by comparison to our rural farmhouse, was a rural metropolis," he said. Plus, it was accessible from the big Washington.

Though he does not disclose his company's revenue, he said about 30,000 people a year dine or stay there. His enterprise now includes 126 employees, 90 seats for dining and 19 rooms at the inn.

It is by far the biggest business in the town, accounting for more than 75 percent of Washington's meals and lodging taxes, one of its only revenue sources. But the inn and townspeople have not always gotten on so keenly.

A 1999 New Yorker article chronicled O'Connell's unhappiness with how his neighbors — such as a metal scrapper next door — affected his business. Over the years he has acquired 26 properties in town, partly to expand his business and partly to moat it off, though relations have improved considerably.

"I would say that for the most part people today are on the same page," Sullivan said. "There's not the same viciousness or meanness that there was."

The inn has been unable to generate much economic spin-off, however. Washington has never had more than 550 people and its population has shrunk in recent years. Once "there was more business in town and more residents. And slowly some of the families have died and the buildings have become bed and breakfasts," said the Reverend Jennings W. Hobson III, a 40-year resident. Other stabs at development failed.

Abdo believes he can succeed where others haven't, and he made his pitch to Sullivan and O'Connell at a dinner the mayor hosted in his home. Abdo and O'Connell bonded over their shared love for old buildings and talked about how the town might be refurbished. An informal

partnership was struck: O'Connell would continue attracting his wealthy guests; Abdo would try to keep them around and lure the younger crowd, too.

Abdo has his own restaurant story, having founded a South Carolina pizza chain — Sharky's — in his twenties before moving to the District and buying and renovating old Victorians in Logan Circle in the 1990s, tearing out the filth but preserving the bricks and beams and blending them with modern finishes: power washing facades, installing huge windows and closets, and building kitchens with stainless steel appliances and Italian tile.

As his condos began to sell for more than a half-million dollars — and in time much more — it cemented the Kent, Ohio, native's reputation as an urban pioneer, someone who saw around corners from a gritty neighborhood to its glamorous future. He took on some of the city's more uninviting corridors: H Street Northeast, New York Avenue and Brookland, each project bigger than the last.

His name became a stamp of changes to come, some of them controversial. If Abdo was coming into the neighborhood, Whole Foods might follow a few years later — but so would rent increases.

As his name and fortune grew he bought his first vacation home in Rappahannock County, a 50-acre estate, from David Brinkley more than 20 years ago. After an exhaustive search, he found a property he liked even better, a 70-acre spread with towering mountain views and a mile of river.

With no cellphone reception and no neighbors in sight, the Ridge, as he calls it, provides a complete getaway from his go-go development business and a refuge for friends like Williams.

The former D.C. mayor, now president of the Federal City Council, a powerful business group, married Abdo and his wife and is their son's godfather. The men were partners in the District's redevelopment, one on the government side and one in industry. And Williams, who'd worked outside for his uncle growing up, said he buzzed through some of his most stressful moments as mayor on a power mower trimming Abdo's lawn.

"Jim basically was not able to touch that Bush Hog when I was there," Williams said. "It was almost like I worked there. I would have a cup of coffee and cereal, read some of the paper, and then work from 8 or 9 o'clock until maybe 7 o'clock at night."

"It really gets your mind out of what is bothering you," he added. "It's almost a dream-like, trance-like state. It's beautiful."

Passing through Washington, Abdo said he saw opportunity in the limousines and Rolls Royces that pulled in to the Inn but often left after 24 hours. He began buying buildings on Main Street to build inns, restaurants and shopping that would convince guests to extend Friday night trips to weekend getaways.

The county's rural character was also attracting more wealthy media and political weekenders from the nation's capital. The median price for a single family home in the county was \$400,000 last year; it cost \$100,000 more to live in the town's limits.

Sullivan is among them. Having published National Journal for 40 years, he and his wife moved here in 2005, and five years later he was elected mayor by a 33-1 vote. He is aware of concerns that more development could diminish what he and its residents new and old love about it.

"At some point might there be too much? Too much of something?" he said. "Yeah that's a risk, but it's a long way off."



Mayor John Fox Sullivan worries about his town's tax dependence on the success of the Inn.
(Photo by Jeffrey MacMillan)

Abdo also wants to introduce Little Washington to the Millennial generation of food-obsessed urbanites who are flocking to his projects in Washington and who have undoubtedly read about the Inn at Little Washington even if they can't afford it, yet.

"I'm certainly not coming here to try to compete with Patrick O'Connell," Abdo said. "I want to come here and help elevate the town and make it something that is extremely compatible to him. I want more people to access his brilliance. He is a brilliant chef. But is he achievable for a lot of people?"

Abdo began by buying a failing bed and breakfast and an ice house for \$435,000, and proposing a sleek, modern overhaul of the existing buildings, much as he might have done in Logan Circle 20 years ago. Winning the needed approvals from the town was not a rubber stamp. He caused consternation by leveling a row of trees and was required to change some of the exterior lighting and windows from the ones he had originally planned to more staid versions.

But Stoltzman, a member of the five-person architectural review board who moved here from Alexandria, conceded that it spent more time reviewing Abdo's plans than anything else in recent memory but said that to this point the town had generally been accepting.

"One of the things that attracted us to the town was there was a real sense of community," she said. "But one of the things that was a little weird, for lack of a better word, was you had this gorgeous inn but there wasn't that much else to do on Main Street."

Abdo's big-city reputation signals another caution for another reason: Other businessmen have swooped in, bought up properties saying they would turn it into the next Sonoma County or Catskills-esque resort town, only to jet a few years later.

"I don't think this is the type of market where you can be an absentee owner, which is what he is," said Bradley Schneider, a board of zoning appeals member.

Schneider was not alone in worrying raising a concern residents with which D.C. residents are quite familiar. "As Little Washington gets busier and there are more people here, part of the concern is, where do we put the cars?" he said.

O'Connell thinks Abdo is different from past investors that have tried to ride his country coat tails.

"Often times they think the magic is immediate — you open the door and people come," he said. "They don't have any idea the kind of work it takes to make it that place the way Jim does."

After winning the necessary approvals, Abdo opened the White Moose Inn this spring, sparing no cost in painting it bright white, fitting it with soaring ceilings, minimalist design, soundproof doors that run over \$1,000 each and showerheads that play music. Rooms run around \$500 a night. Three retro bicycles sit out front for guests to pedal around town. Chefs including Frederik de Pue, of Menu and Table, have come out to cook.

With his foot in the door, he bought six other properties — he is eyeing more — and began frenetically pitching the town to some of his favorite names and brands.

Brian Noyes, whose Red Truck Bakery has attracted the attention of Oprah Winfrey, plans to lease space from Abdo for a new bakery and headquarters in the former offices of the Rappahannock News. "I love the idea of our packages headed across the country with a 'Little Washington, Virginia' return address," Noyes said.

Abdo lined up a deal for Alexandria designer Jeff Akseizer to buy one building in town and another for Debbie Winsor, who folded up her Georgetown luxury home goods store in 2006, to buy a former bus depot and family homestead where she plans to re-open down the street.

"Why not?" Winsor said of the move. "Who would not want to be neighbors with Patrick O'Connell? He's first class, and I think it's the same caliber of clientele."

He's also persuaded chef Daniel O'Brien, whose Seasonal Pantry in Shaw is often booked months in advance, to relocate his entire operation to a vacant and crumbling former tavern and brothel. Having grown up in upstate New York, O'Brien said he was convinced after Abdo brought him to a local farm that will serve as a supplier. He will move here as well.

"When I pulled the asparagus out of the ground and ate it, I said 'Oh my god, I'm 5 years old, 6 years old, 7 years old again,'" he said. "This is my childhood."

As with many small towns, there is a coziness in Washington between the officials granting the approvals and the businesses that need them. Sullivan, for instance, decided to buy and renovate a building across the street from the White Moose Inn in the midst of Abdo's efforts. He and O'Connell are two of the seven members of the council; Sullivan's wife is on the architectural review board.

"If you made it impossible to do business with people they know or are kin to, we would have no one to run town government," said Hobson, the minister.

Despite the saying about how fast word travels in small towns, there are still residents who aren't aware of how grand a plan Abdo envisions.

Even so, Stoltzman said they may be feeling the effects already. She cited the town holiday party, which she had considered a rather placid affair in previous years.

"This year I came 15 minutes late and I couldn't find a parking spot," she said. "And I walked in and I had never seen this many people in the town hall in my life. I cannot think of a business on Main Street that wasn't there — there was so much food there wasn't enough room to put the food out. But the biggest thing was, everybody was talking. Laughing, giggling, yelling to each other across the room. It was an absolute ball. And it lasted until like 9:30. That's really late in Little Washington."

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