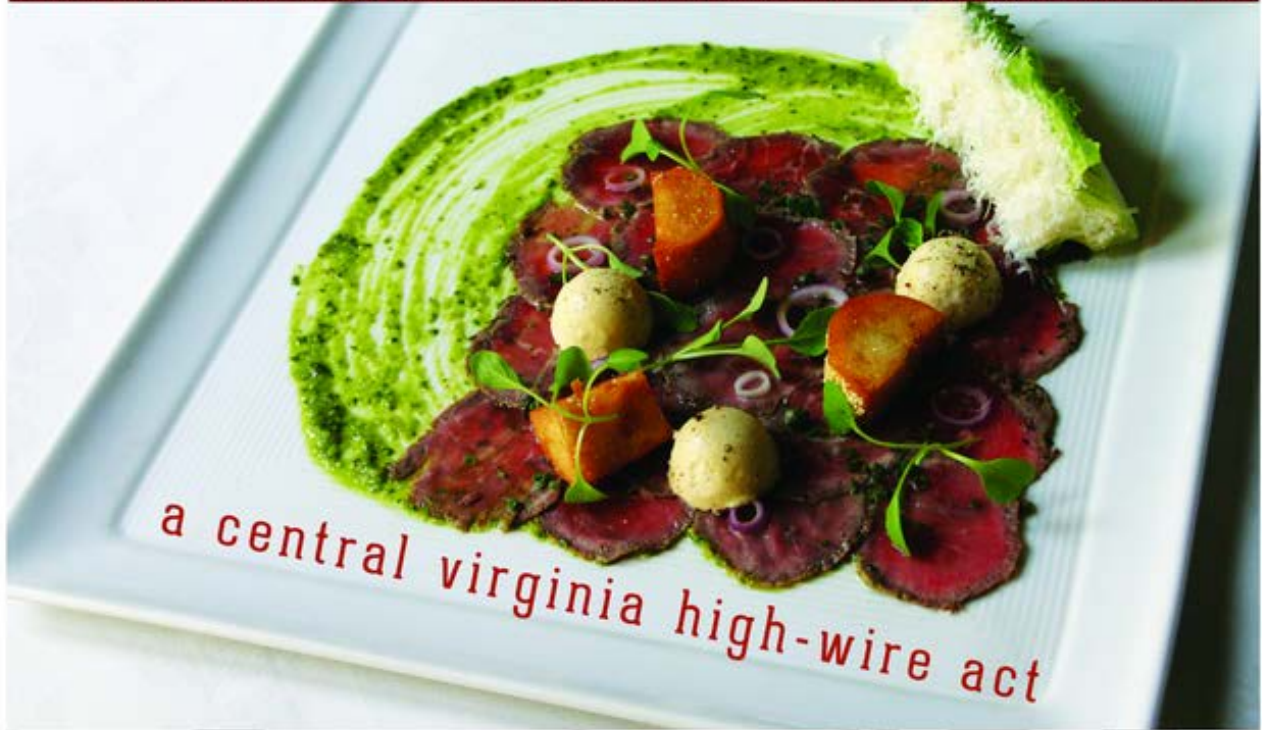


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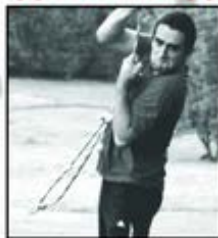
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LITTLE WASHINGTON,
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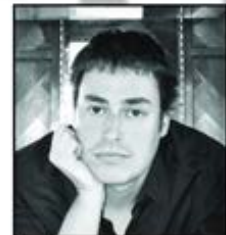
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Forest falls—
with water use



Teen got gun
and left notes



Return of a
novel musician

Little Washington, big taste: A Central Virginia high-wire act

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Chef Patrick O'Connell was once referred to as the "Pope of American cuisine," a title he has taken to heart--and lampooned.

courteney stuart



The Inn at Little Washington has been setting people up for disappointment for years. About an hour and twenty minutes north, just past Sperryville in the small town of Washington, the Inn has become a veritable shrine for the world's foodies. As a result, its storied reputation, considerable expense, and remote location can cause people to harbor wild expectations and plan their visits years in advance.

"My parents have wanted to go there for 20 years," says a longtime Charlottesville resident. "Now they're finally planning to go for their 50th wedding anniversary...and that's in five years."

It's kind of funny, people expecting such a transcendent experience from a meal, but when Chef Patrick O'Connell decided to locate his restaurant in the middle of nowhere, he set himself up for offering nothing less than perfection.

It's a problem that O'Connell and his staff are acutely aware of, and one unique to the best restaurants in the world— when expectations are so high, how do you keep delivering? How do you stave off disappointment?

O'Connell addresses these questions in his cathedral-like kitchen, where a half-a-dozen cooks scurry around gleaming copper and brass stove units, and liturgical music plays as the sun pours in through a high bank of windows. Enmeshed in the elaborate crown moldings above the kitchen entrance are five words inscribed in Roman lettering: anticipation, trepidation, inspection, fulfillment, evaluation.

As O'Connell explains— as he has perhaps to many journalists over the years— it's a facetious homage to Elizabeth Kubler Ross' classic *The Five Stages of Grief*.

O'Connell describes these "five stages of dining" in psychological terms, comparable to the experience of a patient seeing a sympathetic therapist: the patient's enormous anticipation when arriving, the fear that it might not be what you expected, followed by careful inspection, fulfillment ("You hope," O'Connell adds), and finally, evaluation, in which you fix memories and prepare to tell your story to others.

Accordingly, the Inn's staff is actually trained to respond to a list of possible psychological responses from customers, inspired in part by the advice of psychologist Carl Rogers, who said that "the only goal of the therapist is being there for what is."

"The same can be said for a good restaurateur," writes O'Connell in some of the Inn's literature. "Our role is to provide a much needed sanctuary from a world becoming even more dehumanized, desensitized, and disconnected."

Of course, this kind of therapy isn't cheap. Dinner for two can run about \$600 with wine and tip, and that's close to what a room for the night can cost. (Thankfully, ours was comped.)

In 2001, the editors of the *New Yorker* assembled an anthology called *The New Gilded Age: The New Yorker Looks at the Culture of Affluence*, which documented the effects of the enormous individual wealth created during the technological revolution. Included was a story about the Inn by Tony Horwitz, which describes the effect that its glitzy success has had on the small town where it's located, and explores some of the boundless excess that occurs at the Inn— as Horwitz revealed, a party of six once spent \$26,000 for dinner.

More than three decades ago, O'Connell and then partner Reinhardt Lynch opened the restaurant in Washington's former gas station, and one can imagine that the flamboyant couple and their flourishing venture were the center of attention in the little village. Over the years, the Inn has received just about every honor there is, from membership in the exclusive Relais & Châteaux hotel group in 1987, to numerous James Beard Awards, to the first ever 5 Diamond Award from AAA. Celebrities and DC power brokers are frequent visitors. The actor Paul Newman celebrated his birthday at the inn, and former Fed chairman Alan Greenspan and his wife, reporter Andrea Mitchell, were married there. Al Gore, Barbara Streisand, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening have all been guests. In the 1990s, due to all the air traffic, the local government considered putting a ban on helicopter landings in the area.

In 2006, after a heated court battle in which O'Connell sought to seize full control of the Inn, he and Lynch parted ways, but not before O'Connell had to shell out \$17.5 million to buy out Lynch's half of the business.

Tensions between the Inn and the locals have diminished in recent years, but ever since O'Connell and Lynch dubbed the town "little" Washington and ushered in so much flamboyant glitz, there has been a bit of disconnect.

"This kitchen has the feel of a church," a reporter comments.

O'Connell's face lights up.

"Well, you know, I have been referred to as the Pope of American cuisine," he laughs, his head tilted back and his mouth wide open, revealing a bit of the thespian he wanted to be in his youth. He then told us that he had actually met the Pope, Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger, a Bavarian foodie who apparently does some of his own cooking at the Vatican.

Clearly he's having his fun with with the religion here. When guests enter the kitchen, they are greeted by O'Connell standing at the end of a small hallway, with his staff lined up behind him, and one lucky staffer dressed as an altar boy swings a thurible. Meanwhile, O'Connell and his staff sport dalmatian-print aprons, a homage to two lately beloved dogs, immortalized in a large painting of O'Connell by Rise Delmar Ochsner, a portrait artist who has also painted Mick Jagger and Julia Child. Apparently, the dalmatians used to greet guests at the front door wearing pearls.

"We got in a little trouble with the locals when a photo of this came out," O'Connell smiles, and one can imagine a town elder seeing an image of O'Connell performing what appears to be a Catholic religious ceremony in his kitchen.

Still, it's clear that he enjoys being provocative. During our conversation in the kitchen, O'Connell requests some refreshing sparkling wine (it is close to 100 degrees outside) and some popcorn. Popcorn? Yes, only the Inn's perfectly popped and seasoned popcorn is served in miniature old-fashioned movie house popcorn boxes and covered with truffle shavings: camp meets elegant.

"You know, in dog shows dalmatians are judged by how uniform the spaces are between their dots, and that they don't touch," O'Connell says after questions about the dalmatian aprons. While he notes that his dalmatians were not show dogs, and suggested that they might have been the slightly unbalanced descendants of the breed, that fascination with detail is telling. Everywhere one looks there is a fastidious attention to detail; from the gleaming kitchen to the polished wine glasses that almost look invisible, from the chandelier in the chicken coop which is actually a painted gazebo, to the food dishes of course, which arrive in such innovative and intricate arrangements that they are like serious paintings, demanding short, admiring silences.

Likewise, the Inn's lavish interiors, which at first seem oddly disjointed—a Victorian-era theme in one room, a tromp l'oeil of bright green lattice work and smartly dressed monkeys in another— add another dimension to the experience, as it's almost immediately apparent that there is a kind of genius at work. O'Connell has worked with British designer Joyce Conwy Evans since 1981. Evans is a famed London set designer, and has worked on private commissions for the Royal Family. Her ideas have sometimes had outlandish price tags; like cutting up expensive, hand-painted wallpapers to create her own design for the ceiling of the dining room for example, but the result is a room that bathes visitors in its complexities.

Yet somehow the dining experience is so lacking in cloistering formalities and stuffiness that it feels not unlike spending an evening at a very good friend's house. Indeed, the Inn is basically O'Connell's home, and his particular personality is infused into its every detail.

You could say he encourages a cult of personality, a kind of over-the-top knack for public relations. His historian Rachel Hayden, the Inn's Director of Public Relations is a fine cook in in her own right, and the onsite farmer, Joneve Murphy, toils happily in the dirt in the 100-degree heat, her tattooed arms and big hands caked in dust, excited about the ripening eggplant and the cherry tomatoes. Then of course, there's the cheesemonger, a young man with a mock seriousness and sense of the absurd that would make him a good stand-in for Steven Colbert.

Likewise, the Inn's sommelier, Jennifer Knowles, is frighteningly competent, pairing wines with each dish like a mechanic suggesting parts essential to coaxing an abandoned car to life. Yet when we gushed over a refreshing strawberry-flavored wine, she was unrestrained, blurting out enthusiastically that she had "grabbed the bottle and started guzzling it" the first time she tasted it.

The food, taking into account the hot weather, incorporates a few refreshing details, like a dollop of cold cucumber sorbet on a sesame-crusting raw slice of Ahi tuna, a chilled Maine lobster, and an overflowing tin of American Osetra caviar with a cucumber rilette.

"I was never a fan of caviar," says O'Connell, before breaking into a sleepy-eyed grin of pleasure, "until I had really good caviar."

The ingredients are mostly local, but not because O'Connell has jumped on the farm-to-table bandwagon. As he explains, 30 years ago the only thing you could get delivered in Rappahannock County was milk. Sourcing local food was a necessity. Essentially, O'Connell built the wagon.

There's a remarkably tender grilled pigeon breast, given a startling color by a blueberry vinegar marinade, along with a Chesapeake Bay soft-shell crab cooked tempura-style, balanced on a fried green tomato and wielding a crispy piece of speck ham.

According to Hayden, O'Connell doesn't much like difficult presentations or underwhelming portions. "How am I supposed to eat that?" Hayden says O'Connell once complained when presented with a sculpture-like dish at another restaurant. (The way Hayden tells the story, it's clear that dining with O'Connell can be a cringe-producing experience, for as welcoming and friendly as he can be, he clearly does not suffer fools easily). Indeed, a row of lamb loin pieces crusted in parsley and served with fava beans and a simple brush stroke of béarnaise sauce evoked summer, satisfying that need for "fulfillment," and setting the stage for an unusual cheese presentation, the refreshing strawberry wine, and a coffee and desert dénouement.

Indeed, it's a luxurious experience, falling into the care of O'Connell and his staff, who know more about what you are going through by eating there than you do.

But is it worth it? It's both marvelous and completely frivolous, the kind of experience you're careful not to tell your socialist friends about. When preparing and serving food becomes a fetish, a form of high art, does it also become an absurd display of excess? For the price of one meal at the Inn at Little Washington, a family of four could buy a month's worth of groceries. But what if the meal is really, really good and you leave the restaurant feeling euphoric?

Like our celebrities, restaurants can also be famous for being famous, causing people to go through all sorts of emotional contortions when confronted with them. Perhaps that's why people have such anxieties about dining at the Inn, postponing the trip until some momentous occasion in the future, as if the enjoyment of that kind of pleasure were like dying—to be put off for as long as possible.

"What kind of cheese do you use to coax a bear down a mountain?" asks cheesemonger Cameron Smith, presiding over an overflowing cheese plate he has wheeled out on a ceramic cow named Fiara.

"Ca-mem-bear."

A cheese called Up In Smoke, says Smith, was named after a Cheech and Chong movie, and he explains that the cheese undergoes a two step smoking process called the Tillamook Burn, named for a decades-long forest fire in Oregon. "The cheese has a balance of creaminess, crème fraîche, and smokiness," says Smith, "like when the van door opens in the movie it's named after."

We also learn that one cheese is so good because "during the hydrolysis of the proteins found in the milk caseins a white crystalline amino acid called tyrosine, with the chemical formula of $C_9H_{11}NO_3$, is created which is a precursor to thyroxine, melanin, and epinephrine which gives us euphoria in the things that we enjoy in life."

Driving back to Charlottesville, it's hard not to be a bit perplexed by what just happened, as it's not so much a meal as it is a theater performance with food, accompanied by a three-hour therapy session. Your wallet or purse might be lighter, but your expectations about what a meal at a restaurant can be will never be the same.