

The Washington Post

Fall Dining Guide 2013

Tom Sietsema's 40 Favorites

A Balkan restaurant. A *good* delicatessen. Kitchens set on serving smoke. More spinoffs than “Happy Days.”

A bumper crop of interesting new restaurants in Washington means I'm serving you a very different menu from just a year ago for my 14th Fall Dining Guide. While the theme remains the same — favorites — my suggestions reflect a much-changed landscape. It's telling that only 15 of my 40 picks from last October made it onto the 2013 list. More than any previous fall dining guide, this one revels in Washington. While there are useful places to know about in the Maryland and Virginia suburbs, the District is bursting with exciting new flavors that are worth the trip from beyond its borders. As you will read on coming pages, the most enticing stretch of the city to graze along right now is the 14th Street corridor, host to a mini U.N. delegation of cuisines.

You may wonder why some previously well-reviewed venues are missing. Some are in flux: The [Ashby Inn](#) and the Restaurant at [Patowmack Farm](#) recently changed chefs, while [Restaurant Eve](#) in Alexandria announced plans to drop its bistro menu and make every seat in the house more special. Other establishments have been replaced by stronger candidates in their genre. Au revoir, [Chez Billy](#). No bistro in the city can come close to [Le Diplomate](#).

Favorites stand out from the pack, often for their food, but also for the way they make us feel. If there's anything I've learned in this job, it's that food is important, but it's not everything. Comfortable surroundings and attentive service can prop up average cooking, but the opposite is less true: Even great food is diminished if a diner feels neglected.

Here's hoping my favorites become yours.

The Inn at Little Washington



First-timers to one of the most famous addresses in the food world often e-mail me to ask, “What should I know before I go?” My gut reaction: Pace yourselves. The a la carte menu of four courses (three savory ones plus dessert) is preceded not just with lovely breads, but with canapes so gorgeous, it’s tempting to look but not touch them. Tempura fried baby zucchini with an Asian dipping sauce, a shot of sumptuous tomato soup with a coin of truffle-edged, Comte-filled brioche and a miniature lobster salad garnished with a teaspoon of tomato sorbet crowd the table within moments of your being seated in a room so plush you feel like royalty.

From there, follow your heart’s delight and get whatever combination calls to you most. On the light side there might be tiny turnips filled with osetra caviar and staged around a scarlet scoop of beet sorbet. The most decadent second course is “a marriage of hot and cold foie gras.” One of the Inn’s best-known dishes, the plate pairs seared duck liver with a pink slab of pate and garnishes of pickled local fruit and shimmering Sauternes gelee. Crisp, curry-kissed veal sweetbreads remain my obsession, as much for accents of roasted plums and Virginia ham as for the rich organ meat.

Order cheese, if only to spend time with the resident “cheese whiz,” Cameron Smith, and his tag-along cow on wheels, otherwise known as Faira. (Yes, she moos.) Great, sometimes extraordinary, cooking served by a fleet of cosseting servers is part of what makes the Inn such an enchanting place. The cocktails are perfect, the bouquets

are sumptuous, the chef's favorite cologne rests on the counter of the gentlemen's restroom for sampling.

A chat with the star of the show in his grand kitchen — a fillip extended to every diner — reveals plans to add six guest rooms across the street in April. How does chef-owner Patrick O'Connell do it after all these decades? I believe in magic.

Going Out Guide: 309 Middle St. // 540-675-

3800 // www.theinnatlittlewashington.com/home.asp // Dinner Wednesday through

Monday. // Modern American // \$168 to \$198. // Sound check: 70 (Conversation is easy)

[Watch the video](#) on our Cheese Whiz Cameron Smith