

■ OFF THE BEATEN TRACK { Washington DC }

Little wonder

Thanks to one restaurant, 'little' Washington – an hour and a half's drive from the US capital – is a small town with a bigger foodie reputation than you realise, says **Tim Ebner**



PHOTO: GORDON BEALL

L

ast year, there were only three restaurants in DC to be awarded two Michelin stars: minibar by Jose Andres, Pineapple and Pearls and The Inn at Little Washington. While the first two restaurants sit in Washington DC's bustling

hub, the third takes slightly more effort. The Inn at Little Washington requires an advanced booking of two weeks to four months, depending on party size, plus an hour-and-a-half car drive west to 'little' Washington; a quaint, colonial town in the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains.

It's worth it, though. After securing my table at The Inn some months previously, the big day has finally come on a sunny Saturday in early summer, and the town couldn't look more beautiful. Alleged to be "the first Washington of them all" (there are 28 in total) – surveyed by its namesake George Washington in 1749, while serving as a strategic trading post during Virginia's colonial era and Revolutionary War – 'little' Washington today is a classic,

American country settlement, with brick streetscapes, federal architecture and around 150 residents.

It makes it more remarkable that such a teeny spot has become so prominent on the fine dining map, with food-lovers from all around the globe – including former vice president Al Gore – visiting the town. And it's all because of The Inn at Little Washington, or, to be more exact, its 72-year-old chef-owner Patrick O'Connell.

Shaped by a year-long visit to France as a younger man – where he learnt that food is an art – and his childhood roots growing up on a farm, it was 40 years ago that O'Connell transformed an old gas station on Middle Street into the elegant, 24-bedroom guesthouse and gourmet, farm-to-table restaurant it is today. "Long before the 'green movement' had a name, we were supporting our local farmers and growing our own flowers, herbs, and vegetables," says O'Connell, breaking down his restaurant's strictly homegrown food philosophy for me. It's one that has not only resulted in the two-Michelin star rating, but also an AAA five-diamond rating that it's held for 30





“We are doing all we can to ensure perfection – and a third Michelin star”

PHOTOS: GORDON BEALL

years. “Now, we want that third Michelin star, and we are doing everything we can to ensure perfection,” he adds.

Desperate as I am to get my slice of perfection, my booking isn't until later this evening, so I decide to check one of O'Connell's co-side projects: The Village Market. Launched two years ago with the help of a number of local purveyors and farms, the European-inspired farmers' market – held in the town's main square, every Saturday in the summer until late October – it's the place to purchase the region's freshest produce, including vegetables, breads, preserves, meats and cheese. It's also the place to get a guaranteed taste of O'Connell's culinary genius; in the form of an \$8 (€6.70), juicy pulled-pork sandwich, previously prepared in a North Carolina vinegar sauce and served on a pop-up stall by one of The Inn's chefs. Every bite is packed with tongue-tingling tanginess.

I'm left craving a drink and have two excellent options: the Little Washington Winery, which produces small-batch wines from grapes hand-picked from Washington farms, or Pen Druid Brewing. I go with the latter. Located a few kilometres up the road, it belongs to brothers (and members of psych-rock band Pontiak) Lain, Van and Jennings Carney, who brew “farm-style” beers fermented with wild yeast strains. Their headline act, the Golden Swan, is a crisp beer made with raw organic wheat from an adjacent farm. “We consider our farmhouse ale to be

a remarkable expression of our local yeast,” Van Carney explains. “Our passion for making beer reflects the area in which we live. All our beer is wood-fired, and our water comes from our very special 50-year-old well.”

Finally, at 7pm it's time for dinner. I've gone for The Inn's tasting menu experience at \$218 (€183) per person, which features four ‘pick and choose’ dishes, paired with wines from all over the world, including several local vintages, which is an additional \$125 (€105) per person. It takes around three hours altogether to work through.

And what a three hours it is. Mid-Atlantic seared scallops come beautifully served in a half-shell with apple tartare and salmon roe. A playful take on crab cakes is made with pan-seared morel mushrooms and a lattice wrapping of white asparagus. And Peking duck is served three ways: pan-seared, tubed into sausage form, and served confit on a bed of Riesling-braised sauerkraut. O'Connell masterfully uses regional ingredients alongside more exotic elements to create intricate (and yet familiar) dishes that leave me in no doubt that this culinary wizard knows every trick in the book. It also explains how such a small town has made such a big impact in the foodie world. Washington DC – eat your heart out.

theinnatlittlewashington.com

Previous page: It can take up to two months to get a table at The Inn; This page, clockwise from above: Scallops in a half-shell; The Inn used to be a gas station; Chef O'Connell has also launched a Village Market that sells fresh local produce

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