

# The Inn at Little Washington

Mollie Cox Bryan

*At the Inn at Little Washington, Chef Patrick O'Connell's locally inspired, elegant cuisine may attract visitors from around the world, but it is firmly rooted by countless Virginia farmers and producers.*

Dining at the prestigious Inn at Little Washington is a life event—one to be planned and savored. Yet, for all of its opulence, the guiding principals behind it speak of simplicity and authenticity, of shaping local food into a refined elegance.

“The local food movement is not new for us. We’ve been working with local farmers and artisans since we started 30 years ago,” says Patrick O’Connell, the inn’s owner and chef, who is praised internationally for his innovative use of local products combined with sophisticated flair.

And an extraordinary flair it is. The inn’s awards include a long list of highly sought after kudos. Just two of these are the Mobil Travel Guide’s Five Stars for both the restaurant and the inn’s accommodations—the first such award in the guide’s history. It’s also the first inn ever to receive AAA’s Five Diamond award for both food and accommodations. Behind these myriad awards is the almost indescribable manner in which customers are transported into another, richer, lush, magical world upon entering the establishment.

“Our food is just one element in a large picture we use to transport people into a healing, comforting experience,” says O’Connell.

## *A Large Presence in Little Washington*

The Inn at Little Washington is perfectly situated in an almost storybook-like setting, nearly smack in the middle of bucolic Washington, Virginia, with a population just under 200. The town is skirted by the Shenandoah National Park and sits a few miles from the sprawling Northern Virginia town of Warrenton, about an hour’s drive from Washington, D.C.

Fighting urban sprawl is not even an issue in “Little Washington,” which was formed in 1749 after being surveyed by a team that included a young George Washington. Because of the inn’s international success, the local economy is robust in the best of all possible ways—the establishment boosts local artists, contractors, and a variety of craftspeople, along with a substantial amount of local farmers, wineries, and cheesemakers. The inn’s recent expansion, spread over three blocks of the small town, includes an herbal cutting garden with apple trees and fountains. A new large room has a veranda with a sweeping, glorious view of Virginia’s mountains.

“This room is perfect for wedding receptions or rehearsal parties, any special event,” says Rachel Hayden, marketing manager at the inn for nine years.



JULIE KOON

*“We are bringing people in touch with their food. They want to know where it comes from. I do think that the consciousness of people is changing.”*

—Chef Patrick O’Connell



Because the inn owns so much of it, the town remains a beacon to authenticity, guided by O'Connell's precise hand—the same elocution one finds in the food, décor, and every inch of the many rooms and houses available for rental throughout its properties.

### *The World's Best, Right Here in Virginia*

All of this began with O'Connell's vision, conceived while cooking at a woodstove and starting a catering company with a partner more than 30 years ago. The pair was so successful that they were encouraged to open a restaurant. They rented a half of dilapidated garage to house their new venture. Within weeks of opening, critics in Washington, D.C., lauded it as the best restaurant in the region. Thirty years later, many restaurant critics, cookbook authors, and chefs claim it is the finest restaurant in the world.

What does its creator think of the inn's evolution? Does O'Connell ever step back and wonder at it all?

"No. I never stop and consider it. I look out the window at the beautiful gardens and see where the outhouse and junkyard used to be. This is just my home. The growth seemed to happen as naturally and slowly as planting a sapling. I never think of this place as overly elegant or stuffy. It's just my home," he beams.

The truth is that the inn is the very definition of elegant, but the atmosphere somehow transcends any sense of stuffiness. It is imbued with a palpable sense of hospitality. Guests are pampered, of course, but this goes further than that. The spirit of hospitality infuses the attitudes of every server, every chef, every nook and cranny of the gardens, every detail of every space in the restaurant and 18 guest rooms, cottages, and suites.

## Apple Rutabaga Soup

Makes 2 quarts (6 to 8 servings)

*I only recently rediscovered rutabagas and am so happy I did. They were something my mother used to prepare when we were kids—usually as a purée—and even though I thought they tasted a little weird, their gorgeous golden color made you want another mouthful.*

*This soup looks and tastes like liquid autumn. All year long we look forward to serving it again in the fall. It's incredibly simple to put together and can be made well in advance and frozen. The elusive secret ingredient is a bit of maple syrup, which enhances the natural sweetness of the rutabaga.*

*Water or vegetable stock may be successfully substituted for the chicken stock if you wish to make this soup vegetarian or if you don't want to bother making chicken stock.*

—Chef Patrick O'Connell

- 1 stick (¼ pound) butter
- 1 cup onion, roughly chopped
- 1 cup Granny Smith apple, peeled, cored, and roughly chopped
- 1 cup rutabaga, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 cup butternut squash, peeled, seeded, and roughly chopped
- 1 cup carrots, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 cup sweet potato, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 quart good chicken stock
- 2 cups heavy cream
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- Salt and cayenne pepper to taste

In a large saucepan over medium-high heat, melt the butter. Add the onion, apple, rutabaga, squash, carrots, and sweet potato and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are translucent.

Add the chicken stock and bring to a boil. Simmer for 20 to 25 minutes or until all of the vegetables are cooked through and tender.

Purée the vegetables in a blender or food processor. Strain through a fine mesh strainer into the same pot you used to cook the vegetables. Add the cream, maple syrup, salt, and cayenne pepper.

Return the pot to the stove, bring the soup to a simmer, and serve.

## Virginia Wine Pairing

For this soup, we recommend Pearmund Cellars' Viognier, Vinecroft Vineyard (2007). Voted Virginia's Favorite Winery in 2007, Pearmund Cellars is located in the beautiful foothills of eastern Fauquier County. This Viognier explodes with tropical fruit flavors: pineapple and peach with hints of grapefruit. If you are looking for something cleaner, we recommend Linden Vineyards' Avenius Sauvignon Blanc (2006).

—Tyler Packwood, sommelier at Inn at Little Washington





JULIE KOON

### *Local Flavor, International Reputation*

The restaurant's triumph begins, perhaps, with O'Connell's sheer respect for a locally grown asparagus, his cherishing of a perfect, crisp leaf of lettuce, his appreciation of locally raised rabbit or duck, and it flows to everyone involved—from the farmer growing the crops to the chefs carefully preparing the food and the diners enjoying every bit.

"Farmers and chefs live similar, monastic lives. To me, the raw product is as beautiful as the finished one," reflects O'Connell. "So we are sharing our lifestyle. We are bringing people in touch with their food. They want to know where it comes from. I do think that the consciousness of people is changing."

If ever there was a man wedded to a place and a time in the universe, it is O'Connell, who knew from the moment he

moved into his "shack" in Jenkins Hollow that this spot on the planet would hold him. That he did not go to New York or Paris to make his name speaks of his love of the region and his passion for rural life.

But his passion is nowhere more evident than in his kitchen. Walking into it, a sense of the sacred hangs in the air. Gregorian chants play softly over the stereo, huge windows open to the Virginia sky, and his staff—about 116 people altogether, including 32 kitchen staff—work around a massive 16-foot brass and bottle green Vulcan range, huge chef's tables, and state-of-the-art ovens. Observing them is like watching a symphony or a highly sophisticated ritual. "The five phases of dining"—a tongue-in-cheek paraphrase of Elizabeth Kubler Ross' classic *The Five Stages of Death and Dying*—are inscribed on the wall: anticipation, trepidation, inspection, fulfillment, evaluation.

O'Connell's kitchen operates 24 hours a day. The menu changes every day to reflect the local produce and the season. Some recent menu items include ribbons of Virginia country ham and grilled black mission figs, crispy seared black sea bass on braised baby bok choy, and pecan-crusted barbecued short ribs paired with a miniature filet mignon wrapped in Swiss chard.

In this cathedral-ceilinged kitchen one will also find exquisite deserts, such as warm roasted local plum cake with sweet corn ice cream and the restaurant's specialty, a dessert sampler known as the Seven Deadly Sins. The inn also offers a complete vegetarian menu, including such selections as wild mushroom napoleon, avocado and grapefruit salad with pistachio vinaigrette, and a fricassee of potato gnocchi with fall vegetables—unusual for a restaurant of its caliber.

The Inn at Little Washington's seasonal, sublime menu is complemented by its 15,000-bottle wine cellar, hosting more than 1,200 different selections from France, California, Italy, and Virginia.

"What we have here is a beautiful synthesis of local food and sophistication," says O'Connell. "I call it 'Refined American Cuisine,' but it retains the soulfulness of the local country."

*Mollie Cox Bryan is the author of Mrs. Rowe's Restaurant Cookbook: A Lifetime of Recipes from the Shenandoah Valley (Ten Speed Press, 2006) and the forthcoming Mrs. Rowe's Little Book of Southern Pie (Ten Speed Press, 2009).*

### **The Inn at Little Washington**

(540) 675-3800

[www.theinnatlittlewashington.com](http://www.theinnatlittlewashington.com)

The inn's seven-course prix fixe dinner is \$148 per person on Monday through Thursday, \$148 on Friday and Sunday, and \$168 on Saturday. A 10-course tasting menu, with or without paired wines, and a vegetarian tasting menu are also available. Reservations are strongly recommended, particularly on the weekends.