

Best Bites

What's New. What's Hot. What's Good.

By THOMAS HEAD & CYNTHIA HACINLI

Luxurious Inn and Spa Planned for Middleburg

The idea of Salamander Inn," says **Sheila Johnson** of the inn and spa she is building in Middleburg, "is total escape." Being an innkeeper is a new career for Johnson, who with her former husband, **Robert Johnson**, was cofounder of Black Entertainment Television. The sale of BET to Viacom in 2000 left Ms. Johnson one of the wealthiest women in America.

The seed of this project, she says, was a meeting with representatives of the Piedmont Environmental Council, who approached her about buying a 400-acre tract of land, part of the Pamela Harriman estate, next to the town of Middleburg. The land was in danger of being developed for tract housing.

"Middleburg has lots of visitors and needs a destination resort," Johnson says. The inn will bring together several of Johnson's interests. Her daughter, Paige, is a rider and Olympic-team hopeful. The inn will have equestrian facilities and a grand-prix ring for jumping events.

Johnson herself is interested in design. She has a line of linens that is available at the Tiny Jewel Box and that will be used at the inn. She is on the board of Parsons School of Design and sponsored a competition there to design uniforms for the inn employees. "Everything in the inn," she says, "will have my print on it."

The inn will sit on about 60 of the 400 acres and will have 40 rooms—suites in the main building and a number of cottages. It will include a spa and fitness center and a pavilion seating up to 600 for weddings and cultural events. A ten-acre working farm with greenhouses will grow vegetables, herbs, and flowers for the inn and its restaurants. The Salamander Inn is scheduled to open in the fall of 2004.

Johnson has hired **Todd Gray**, owner with his wife, **Ellen**, of DC's Equinox restaurant, to be in charge of the inn's restaurants. Gray will continue to run Equinox, serving as executive chef at both locations. Working under him will be two of his sous chefs: **Anthony Chittum** will serve as executive chef at Equinox; **Brendan Cox** will be at the Salamander Inn and at Market Salamander, a takeout food and provisions shop that will open on the main street of Middleburg in November.

"It's an opportunity every chef dreams of," says Gray, who has taken part in the design of the restaurants. There will be opportunities for guests to watch the kitchen action—a table in the kitchen will seat eight; a bar with stools will allow a view of the kitchen for individual diners. Guests at the inn also can watch the cooking on the plasma-screen television sets in their rooms.

The more formal of the inn's two restaurants will be Goose Run, named after the creek that runs through the property. A casual restaurant, Cafe Bits, will be open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At the Salamander Inn, Gray, who spent seven years in the kitchen of **Roberto Donna's** Galileo, is looking forward to reawakening the Italian side of his cooking, blending the styles and ingredients of Italian Piedmont and the Virginia Piedmont.

Gray describes Market Salamander, in a historic building that most recently housed a gun shop, as a "working chef's market." It will offer takeout food and sandwiches and a selection of Virginia and Italian products, many under the inn's label. The market will have a terrace for eating and a cobbled courtyard for classes and events. When the inn opens, it will be connected to the market by horse-drawn carriage.

"We're aiming," says Johnson, "to have one of the best wine cellars on the East Coast." The basement cellar will have a table that seats 25 for tastings, and each room will have a wine bar to allow for "romantic weekends without interruptions from room service."

Hand-Crafted Ice Creams for Hot-Weather Relief

When chef **Leland Atkinson** moved his catering business into a former ice-cream parlor, he inherited a soft-serve yogurt machine and began using it to make ice cream and sorbets. This was the beginning of **Simplicity**, a line of ice creams and sorbets now sold at **Sutton Place Gourmet**. Chef Atkinson says his ice creams are hand-crafted and made with freshly toasted nuts and spices, just-squeezed juices, and no extracts except "a little vanilla extract to round out flavors." The line includes Bourbon Madagascar Vanilla, Cappuccino Crunch, and Chocolate Chimp, made with milk chocolate, banana, and marshmallow. Summer flavors include margarita sorbet and blackberry-and-lemon-thyme sorbet.

Atkinson has also begun working with chefs to supply custom flavors for their restaurants—Jamie's Jolt (Cafe Mocha with Kahlua) for Jamie Leeds at **15 Ria**; chocolate-tequila sorbet for Glen Adams of **Taqueria Poblano**; and for the **Sweetwater Taverns**, a line of sorbets made with their house-brewed beers.

Dining With a River View

A new chef and a new menu may bring the eating at **Potowmack Landing** up to the view. Located by the Washington Sailing Marina off the George Washington Parkway in Alexandria, the restaurant has been known for its dramatic vistas of the Potomac and DC skyline—but not for its food.

Enter **Duane Keller**, formerly of Alexandria's Blue Point Grill, a longtime fixture on *The Washingtonian's* 100 Best Restaurants list. Native American history and cooking are the inspiration for Keller's menu—the restaurant perches on Daingerfield Island, once the site of a Native American community. Among the new plates are starters like bay-scallop-and-shrimp succotash, a lemon hummus "martini," and a smoked-salmon-and-artichoke pizza.

Dinner ranges from achiotte-grilled Gulf shrimp over angel-hair pasta sauced with cilantro and lime to veal liver with Vidalia onions and a wild-mushroom demi-glace. Lunch items include a blue-crab BLT and sesame-seared tuna salad. Through early fall, steamed hard-shell crabs will be served on the waterfront deck. A Sunday jazz brunch includes poached salmon, carved Angus top round, omelets, and breakfast breads and pastries. Starters are \$4 to \$13, lunch entrées \$8 to \$15, dinner entrées \$15 to \$29. Potowmack Landing (703-548-0001) is open daily for lunch and dinner and Sundays for brunch.

Entertaining Made Easy—And Sensible

Ina Garten is proof not only that there is life after Washington but also that it can be a good life. Having published her third cookbook, *Barefoot Contessa Family Style* (Clarkson Potter, \$35), Garten is poised to debut on the Food Network in November with *Barefoot Contessa*, a new series on entertaining.

Garten was part of DC's go-go scene back in the 1970s, when she was a budget analyst at the White House during the Ford and Carter administrations. But she and her husband, **Jeffrey**, then a member of the White House's Council for International Economic Policy and now dean of Yale University's School of Management, always knew there was something more out there. Garten found it in 1978 when she opened the **Barefoot Contessa**, a specialty food store in the Hamptons, catering parties for celebrities like Steven Spielberg and developing a following who clamored for her from-scratch onion dip and coconut cupcakes. She published her first book, *The Barefoot Contessa*, in 2000, then *The Barefoot Contessa Parties!*

Like its predecessors, Garten's newest book has gorgeous photographs and user-friendly recipes. That, coupled with her unaffected approach to cooking and entertaining—"first I remind myself that these are my friends"—makes her a good companion to have in the kitchen. Many of the recipes are Garten's takes on classics like chicken stew with biscuits and rib roast. Others, such as Parmesan chicken sticks in the chapter on cooking for kids, are Garten originals.

There are a couple of recipes from her DC days, including Provençal stuffed tomatoes and a **Julia Child**-inspired leg of lamb roasted over potatoes. It's a menu she still serves a lot "because you can actually relax before your guests arrive."