



VEGGING OUT
 Chef John Shields'
 chilled vegetable
 "Minestrone"

Sweet Virginia

THE NEW CAPITAL OF FINE DINING? CHILHOWIE, VIRGINIA. THIS BLINK-AND-YOU'LL-MISS-IT TOWN IN THE BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS IS HOME TO ONE OF THE NATION'S TOP KITCHENS. BY JAY CHESHES

THE TOWN HOUSE restaurant, nestled in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of southern Virginia, boasts its own cozy inn, with claw-foot tubs, pillow-top beds and antique rocking chairs ripped from the pages of *Martha Stewart Living*. Good thing, too, since most accommodations in the area are spartan, to say the least. But a meal at the restaurant is hardly a homespun affair. At a recent three-hour dinner (the tasting menu maxes out at 10 courses), one cutting-edge

dish featured puréed orange frozen into a sphere with liquid-nitrogen then stuffed with mussels and saffron mayo. Another included an edible bouquet of foraged flowers and herbs.

"One of the great meals of our lives," gushed *Food & Wine*, going on to name its chefs, John Shields and Karen Urie Shields, the best in the country. Entries from notoriously snarky Chowhound.com stutter with superlatives: "Phenomenal," "Stunning," "Unforgettable." You'd be

hard-pressed to find food this inventive in New York or Los Angeles, let alone the town of Chilhowie, Virginia—population 1,800 and a per capita income of just \$17,000. And yet there it is, across the tracks from a McDonald's playground—destination dining in a remote corner of the country.

While great rural restaurants such as Michel Bras in the French Alps and El Bulli in the Catalan countryside in Spain draw plenty of traffic to remote corners of Europe, they have virtually

food&drink

no equal on this side of the pond. Sure, a few venerable spots require a bit of travel (French Laundry outside San Francisco, Blue Hill at Stone Barns just north of New York), but those are short drives from major metropolises. The Town House—five hours south of Washington, D.C., and en route to very little—is a test case for bringing the European model to American soil.

The restaurant, casually outfitted with dark wood tables and faux-gas chandeliers, is a remarkable bargain (four lavish courses cost just \$58) and a family affair. At the start of service one night, Kyra Bishop, the *maitre d'*, who owns the place with her husband, Tom, offers wine from what was once her private collection. Her daughter is a server and shuttles entrées from the lablike kitchen, where earlier in the day a young cook spent hours painstakingly cutting raw squid into morsels no bigger than grains of rice (for a mock risotto).

The Town House may look like the same neighborhood bistro that the Bishops (who made a fortune in scrap metal) opened in 2002 as a basic meat-and-potatoes joint, but for the last three years it's been far more ambitious than that.

The owners lured Shields and his

then-girlfriend Karen south from Chicago in 2007. The chefs—he cooks savory, she cooks sweet—had been working for Windy City icons Charlie Trotter and Grant Achatz at their restaurants when they decided to strike out on their own. “We’d put in our time working for other chefs,” says Urie Shields. “We were ready to start doing our own stuff.” The young couple, who’d just started dating, turned down the chance to open Trotter’s new Vegas outpost and instead began scouring want ads for the right solo endeavor. Shields spied a posting on Craigslist heralding “a great place for a husband-and-wife team,” so he dashed off a résumé.

Meanwhile back in Chillhowie, the Bishops, who’d posted the ad, had already narrowed their search for a new chef to a few promising candidates. They never expected to hear from two of Chicago’s most creative young epicureans.

“I called John, and I said, ‘You realize where we are, right?’” Kyra Bishop recalls.

Shields had no idea. “I looked up the place online,” he says. “I was like, ‘No way in heck am I moving out there.’” But he agreed to a tryout. “We made them dinner,” he recalls.

“They invited us back to their house, we drank wine, we talked about life and food and travel.” By the end of the evening, he was sold.

“Our friends from Chicago said we were crazy,” Shields says. “‘You’ll be back soon enough,’ they said.”



TOWN & COUNTRY
Chefs Karen Urie Shields and John Shields outside the Town House

The Bishops turned out to be generous patrons of the culinary arts. The new Town House would be a labor of love, less about profit than foodie cachet. To sweeten the deal, they built a new kitchen, decked out with \$50,000 worth of cutting-edge gastronomic gadgetry.

Shields’ food, a mix of Trotter-style refinement and the edgy technique he picked up from Grant Achatz at Alinea—the country’s most acclaimed avant-garde restaurant—hit rural Virginia with the shock factor of performance art.

TOWN HOUSE'S PEACHES POACHED WITH SAKE AND LEMON VERBENA, SERVED WITH SHAVED TOMATO ICE

- 4 peaches (remove and save pits)
- 1½ cups water
- 1 cup sake
- 1 capful almond extract
- 3½ tbsps sugar
- 6 sprigs of lemon verbena
- 1 lemon, juiced and zested with a peeler
- Pinch of salt

TOMATO ICE

- 6 tomatoes
- Salt to taste
- Coarse salt for garnish
- Olive oil for garnish

PEACHES: After pitting the peaches, crack the pits in half and add to a small pot. Then add the peaches, water, sake, lemon juice, almond extract, sugar and salt. Simmer for 20 minutes until tender, then remove peaches to a container and add the verbena and lemon peel. Chill the peaches; once cold, remove the skin.

TOMATO ICE: Blend the tomatoes with the salt for 10 seconds and pour into a cheese cloth (or coffee filter) to drain. Taste for seasoning, then pour into a shallow pan and freeze. Scrape with a fork to create a fine ice.

TO SERVE: Place half of the peach in a bowl and ladle some of the cooking liquid over top with some tomato ice, a pinch of coarse salt and olive oil.



FARM FRESH
Caramelized
eggplant and
canteloupe with
grilled mango

“At first we went through a busy period when everybody wanted to see what we were doing,” he recalls. “Then we went through a period when people saw what we were doing and didn’t come back. We rocked the boat.”

They had dropped the customary plate-size steaks and shrimp cocktail from the menu, and, consequently, business declined precipitously. But the chefs stayed the course.

By the fall of 2008, Shields had begun a blog, a visual diary of dishes, which caught the eye of a Chowhound.com contributor who later dropped by. His subsequent post declared the visit “probably in my top five meals in North America” and put the Town House on the national map. Six months later, a *New York Times* writer dropped in, followed by the *Food & Wine* scout. This summer, the magazine featured Shields in its annual roster of best new American chefs.

“There’s something really romantic about having a destination restaurant,” says Urie Shields. “We’re not influenced by chef colleagues or neighboring restaurants—because there aren’t any. So we’ve really been able to tune into who we are as chefs. I don’t think that would’ve happened as fast if we’d stayed in Chicago.”

In the last three years their food has become more naturalistic—many dishes appear to have sprung up fully formed on the plate, and much more reflective of their Appalachian surroundings. One recent dish—described on the menu as “representing spring rain”—was inspired by an early morning stroll Shields took in the woods. It features

banana ice cream, foraged nasturtiums and fresh peas with parmesan water as rain drops on the plate. A dessert looks like a bucolic still life, with chocolate soil topped with fragrant flowers and herbs.

Among the local farmers they’ve come to rely on for much of their produce, the chefs have become full-fledged celebrities, which makes for slow going as they wander through the weekly green market in the nearby town of Abingdon. Looking over the season’s first strawberries one Saturday, the Shieldses are crowded by well-wishers. “The hipster chefs have arrived!” booms Mike “Ratface” Riley, from the farmer’s market steering committee.

Despite the local adulation—and the Shieldses’ newfound national renown—the Town House still struggles, often serving just one or two tables on weeknights. “We would have been out of business long ago if not for the Bishops,” says John. Still, the chefs are enjoying the freedom that the slow pace affords them. They closed up shop for two weeks not long ago and jetted off to Europe for a food-focused honeymoon, hitting restaurants with a total of 22 Michelin stars. And they devote plenty of time simply to honing their craft.

“We’re really dedicated to this,” says Urie Shields. “It takes time. We know that. For right now we’re really satisfied with being influenced by the environment, nature, the landscape and the artisans.”

JAY CHESHES, *who writes for Saveur and The New York Times, will happily cross multiple time zones for the right meal.*

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