

It all starts with fresh - at left, white asparagus, ramps, salsify, maitake mushroom, pigeon.

Right, Longoven's other passion: flavors from fermentation. The roast pigeon is succulent, the salsify caramelized.

# LONG TIME COMING

Richmond's Longoven spends months crafting flavors you've never known.

by MATTHEW KORFHAGE | photography by TODD WRIGHT

Almost every plate at Longoven begins six months before you eat it. It starts, often enough, in a jar. Andrew Manning, one of three chef-owners at the year-old Richmond fine-dining restaurant, keeps a fermentation lab that looks like the lair of a mad scientist.

"This clear liquid right here is shiitake mushrooms," he says, pointing to a vacuum-sealed bag full of a pasty substance that will soon add depth to salt-cured mackerel. "That stuff is gold. This stuff tastes insane."

Stacks and rows of containers are filled with experiments in flavor, each of which might ferment for months to attain just the right depth and funk. Manning, who sports a neck tattoo and neatly barbered hair, is giddy about his work.

He pulls out more and more house creations, each the basis for a world of dishes: blackened Meyer lemons that look like squishy coal, house-made black garlic, precious spring ramps being turned into vinegar, and three different cures and fermentations of turnips used for a smoked duck dish.

Using tweezers, he plucks a salt-cured green strawberry with the cakey give of meringue. "Salty, umami, strawberry bombs," Manning calls them. His co-chef, Patrick Phelan, opts instead for "Straw-boshi," a play on the name for preserved Japanese plums. They taste like nothing except themselves, so dense with the essence of tart berry they have become utterly alien.

Maybe he'll powder them, and dust them onto a





Opposite, chefs and owners Andrew Manning, Patrick Phelan and Megan Fitzroy Phelan.

Top right, cured rockfish in buttermilk with wild onion flowers. Right, white asparagus beurre blanc with salmon roe.

halibut crudo, Manning says.

“Or ice cream!” says pastry chef Megan Fitzroy Phelan, Patrick’s wife.

“Or ice cream,” he agrees.

The restaurant, much like the food it serves, has been a long time in the making.

*Bon Appetit* may have named Longoven one of the top 50 new restaurants in America in 2016, but it took another year and a half before it actually opened in Scott’s Addition.

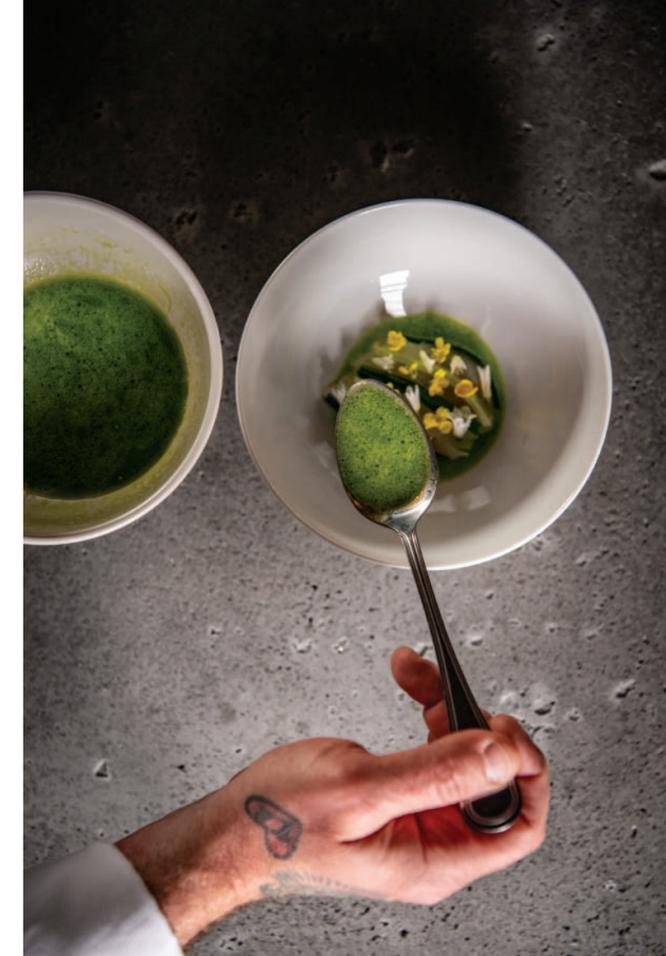
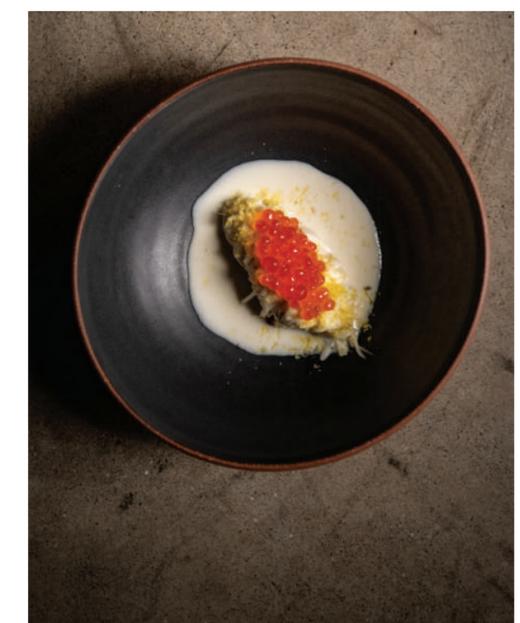
Back in 2016, the chefs were cooking their refined tasting menus only twice a month, out of a tiny wood-fired bakery called Sub Rosa that didn’t even have a conventional oven.

“At the pop-up, it was hilarious,” says Patrick Phelan. “We had a Weber grill outside the back door, and even if it was raining we had to run out there.”

The idea for the restaurant originated with a decade-old pact among the three. Patrick Phelan and Manning had first met at Richmond fine-dining institution L’Opossum.

“Andrew was the first chef that took me under his wing and taught me a different perspective of how to approach food, an ethos with food,” says Phelan, now 45. “I was young, still in my 20s, but I took it pretty seriously.”

Years later, Manning called the Phelans from Italy to propose a reunion in Virginia. At the time Manning was cooking in Italy’s Piemonte region, while Megan was making desserts at some of the finest restaurants in New York. Patrick, meanwhile, had taken a break from restaurants. But they all agreed to return. When they started Longoven in 2014, they found a Richmond dining scene in full bloom. They ran pop-up dinners off and on for four years while searching for the perfect location and moment.



Longoven finally opened last June in a warmly minimalist space painted the colors of deep ocean. The restaurant feels as meditative as a Rothko painting, aside from the chefs’ habit of playing tunes by Arcade Fire or Willie Nelson in the restaurant.

The menu is equally minimal, and ever changing: just 15 or so small plates, ordered a la carte, or an immersive chef’s tasting menu that has to be scheduled in advance.

Each dish is listed, in the current fine-dining fashion, only by its ingredients: “mussels, melted leek, bacon, potato foam.” No plate ever repeats precisely, but instead changes with what’s in season and the ingredients that have matured in the back of the house.

Manning starts each day in the garden, farming the herbs and flowers that adorn his plates. “It’s a nice way to start the day before working in the kitchen for 16 hours,” he says. And over the past year, the three have slowly built their arsenal of fermented flavors, an armamentarium they had no access to when working the pop-ups.

Three years ago, Longoven first served a pigeon plate with New Zealand spinach that grew “like grapevines” in Manning’s garden, and fresh coriander he had in abundance. But on a tasting menu in April, the dish became something closer to conceptual art.

Jean's will said  
a lot about her.

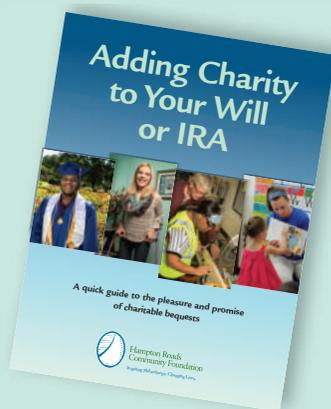


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The pigeon's claw hangs over one side of the plate, next to a woody carpet of maitake mushroom, acidic sorrel herb and twiglike salsify, a root that tastes a bit like oysters. The dish looks a bit like a freshly killed bird on the forest floor, a hunter's still life. And yet the meat is so tender and the flavors so bottomless the comfort is immediate. It is a rarefied and luxuriant vision of farm food.

The drinks and pastries extend from a similar aesthetic. Much of the Europe-heavy wine list is naturally fermented, and the restaurant's predilection for kombuchas and preserved fruits also finds its way into the cocktail menu. Meanwhile, desserts build on the flavors in the savory dishes: On the tasting menu, an airy sunchoke foam with shrimp might be followed a few courses later by a sunchoke and coffee dessert.

The comprehensiveness of vision has paid off. The restaurant has been named the best new restaurant in Richmond by nearly every major publication in the city that hands out such awards.

But according to Patrick Phelan, Longoven was never planned as the elaborate fine-dining powerhouse it's become. Its owners originally thought they might just open a punky, improvised spot where they'd serve food directly to diners sitting just feet away. But they built their restaurant the same way they build each plate. They allowed it to take shape naturally, from the ingredients they had available.

"I mean, we used to always say 'Let's just open a place and do food,'" Phelan says. "Now sometimes I look at this place and I just pinch myself. I mean, (Andrew) mentioned this idea to me in a phone call 12 years ago. And now we're here." ■

The recently installed fire pit adds warmth to Longoven's outdoor seating area.