**While supporting Richmond restaurants during this pandemic, don't forget the old dining institutions**

Tanglewood Ordinary sits like a time capsule on the edge of state Route 6 in Goochland County. The building, a rustic log cabin erected in the 1920s, has served many purposes over the years - service station, convenience store, country dance hall during Prohibition - until Anne and Jim Hardwick bought the place in 1986.

Within its walls, the Hardwicks have erected a reminder of simpler times, a time when detours down unfamiliar back roads held promise of warm family-style suppers. They were inspired by the way Jim remembers eating at his grandmother's house in Dublin in Pulaski County as a kid - bowlfuls of comfort food set at the center of your table, coupled with down-home Southern hospitality.

Generations of diners have been coming to Tanglewood. It's easy to see why. Much like their restaurant, the Hardwicks are salt-of-the-earth, generous people, with a geniality that can easily lead to hourslong conversations, like the one I had with them. "We just decided to run [Tanglewood] like we wanted to be treated when we went into a restaurant," Jim says.

Closing their doors to the public in response to the outbreak of COVID-19 was never a decision the Hardwicks imagined they'd have to make. But for Tanglewood and other longtime establishments, these are unprecedented times, ones that require evolving in ways they've never had to before. And when one has been doing things a certain way for decades, change doesn't necessarily come easy.

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Tanglewood Ordinary wasn't designed to be a takeout restaurant. Contactless pickup and online ordering are somewhat antithetical to what Tanglewood is all about. "It really is as much about the experience as it is the food," Anne explains. "It's the people. It's the historic building."

But since the outbreak, the Hardwicks have forced themselves to adapt. Tanglewood's last day of dine-in service was March 15. They quickly decided to offer their family-style suppers to-go ($17.49/person), at first by phone and then through an online ordering system. A sign out front reminds customers to stay in their cars. "It's a whole new way of doing business," Anne admits, noting that takeout is a first for them after 34 years.

In fact, it took Anne nearly a week to get Tanglewood's online system off the ground. "There were some days I thought I was going to tear my hair out," she says, laughing. Jim recalls seeing his wife "on the phone sometimes for two or three hours at a time."

These days, it's comforting to know one can still cozy up to a bundle of Tanglewood's homestyle fried chicken, even while staying at home. The life-affirming quality of a fried drumstick, held like a corn cob between your fingers, is undeniable. Leave the double-frying, the brining and the battering, and the sauces to other chicken shacks. Tanglewood's is as classic as they come. It's an ode to Southern simplicity, just like Tanglewood. The chicken dons a thin, crispy veil of breading that frames but doesn't overwhelm the beauty of the meat - "like a pretty girl wearing a scarf," quips Jim.

And, of course, no display of Southern comfort is complete without the fixings. Biscuits and cornbread brim with grit and tenderness. Coleslaw is innocently sweet; mac 'n' cheese, thickly crusted. New potatoes are mashed and chunky, under a torrent of gravy fashioned out of chicken drippings. Boggy collards and turnip greens have been stitched with threads of country ham, while green beans, as soft as overripe fruit, have been left to sit overnight to breathe in all the meaty flavors of salt-cured ham trimmings.

What keeps the Hardwicks motivated is knowing they're able to furnish a slice of familiar comfort to customers during an otherwise unfamiliar and unsettling time. "The reward for doing it is knowing that we're keeping people enjoying things," Anne says. "It's been a really nice opportunity to serve the community in a different way."

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Over in the Fan District, Helen's has been making unprecedented changes of its own. The restaurant preserves a rich history, dating back to 1935. At the time, it was owned by Helen Donati, who "ran a rowdy joint," according to manager Claire Tuite. The restaurant stayed in the Donati family until 1994, when Claire and her parents, Leslie and John, took it over.

For the last 26 years, the Tuites have transformed Helen's into a quintessential neighborhood spot, combining elements of fine dining with a bar scene popular among the younger set. As Claire puts it, "We introduce beautiful food to 21-year-olds who drink PBR."

Helen's also stands as a kingmaker in Richmond fine dining. Just look at the restaurant's impressive roster of alums, including L'Opossum's David Shannon and Longoven's Andrew Manning and Patrick Phelan (as well as Noah Sandoval of three Michelin-starred Oriole in Chicago).

Part of this legacy - one that "never gets told," as Claire points out - is that Helen's helped define the modern Richmond restaurant scene. It was one of several female-owned restaurants, along with Stella's and Millie's Diner, which, in the '90s, "really just pushed Richmond to the next level for beautiful food."

Say what you will about its age; Helen's has never been one to simply sit around and stagnate. Its menu is constantly evolving. And, as other restaurants were still figuring out what to do in response to the outbreak, Helen's was one of the very first to close. After dinner service on the 15th, it pivoted to taking phone orders for contactless pickup and delivery of food, beer and wine (and, more recently, cocktails as well).

The transition, though, was far from seamless. "We took about a week to 10 days to figure out what we were going to do as far as to-go and that kind of thing," Claire says. "It's kind of building from the ground up a little bit. … It's a completely different operation. … We've done pickup, but only here and there. It's never been where that's primarily all we do."

While accounting for cost and transportability, the restaurant still imparts the refined comfort of Helen's through its limited takeout menu. Its rendition of chicken saltimbocca ($20), a traditional Roman dish, exudes the humble yet hearty spirit of cucina Romana. Spooned over creamy white beans and breaded chicken, loosely draped in bacon and melted mozzarella, is a velvety saucing of white wine and capers, percolating with the aroma of fresh sage and lemon zest.

Homegrown classics - such as shrimp and grits ($20), high on low-country charm, and the famous Helen's burger ($12) - deliver their own mix of comfort and refinement. The shrimp do a tuck and dive into a shallow bayou of gravy, rich with butter and herbs, spooned over grits as creamy as tapioca pudding. The burger - thick and burly, heaped with white cheddar, bacon, and sweet-sour pickled onions - fits snugly with a side of jaggedy, dill-speckled butter fries ($5).

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What the future now holds for Tanglewood, Helen's and other decades-old dining establishments remains as unclear as it does for other restaurants. At least for now, they have learned to adapt to this new business environment, even if that means scrapping modes of operating that have worked for generations.

Anne Hardwick, for one, is hopeful that Tanglewood will endure. "We have longevity, and we have staying power. So our perspective right now is we're not going anywhere, and we're just kind of going with the flow and seeing where this goes."

Claire Tuite similarly refuses to believe that Helen's is going anywhere anytime soon. "We're a staple in the community," she says, adding that losing Helen's would be "an unconscionable loss - it's a hard thing for me to even wrap my head around."

I hope they're right. As Times-Dispatch dining editor Karri Peifer wrote back in January, "The story of Richmond restaurants is the story of us." And who has been telling Richmond's story longer than places like Tanglewood and Helen's?

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**Pandemic pop-ups: Alternative dining goes mainstream**

"The beauty of a pop-up," Longoven's Patrick Phelan observed, "is that it's just this moment in time, and you can move through it without a whole lot of rules. And it kind of fits the environment that we're in right now."

Though pop-ups were popular before the recent coronavirus outbreak, this concept is particularly conducive to the world we're in now. The pop-up answers many questions that chefs and restaurant owners have been asking themselves: how do I respond to changing conditions and expectations? How do I still produce inspiring dishes, while minding decreased economies of scale and invariably higher food costs associated with a takeout-only business model? How do I keep diners engaged and excited about what is essentially dining-in dining out?

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While Vanna Hem and Adam Stull, like others in the industry, were forced to pivot in response to the outbreak, their experience running their Cambodian-themed pop-up Royal Pig has prepared them in certain ways for this period of change and uncertainty.

"We're very versatile. We're able to adapt to change. Each one of our pop-ups is fairly different. … And we're used to cooking wherever we can," said Stull. If the situation demanded, Hem added, they could "probably put out a whole kitchen in our backyard."

The two of them are as much chefs as they are traveling showmen. The last year, they've staged performances of Royal Pig all over town, from a family-style variety show at The Broken Tulip to an intimate cabaret of plated dishes at Secco Wine Bar. The pair have roved from kitchen to kitchen, for one or two nights at a time, showcasing the humble pageantry of dishes that Hem's family, refugees to this country after the Vietnam War, made for him growing up.

Hem and Stull are accustomed to reworking their menu, which combines traditional Khmer dishes with modern cooking and plating methods, to fit whatever venue they're in. Their recent takeout-only adaptation of Royal Pig at Bingo Beer Co. in May exhibited the talented duo's versatility.

Coarse-ground pork belly ($12) was spun into a spicy, offbeat infusion of lemongrass, kaffir lime, and ginger made for spooning into your mouth with red cabbage or slices of cucumber, carrot, and spongy Thai eggplant. Think: Cambodian bagna cauda.

Ghostly coils of squid and shrimp whistled with fresh mint and cilantro and shrieked with lime juice and arcs of red onion. This ceviche ($12), Hem noted, happens to be his favorite birthday dish.

Meanwhile, folded into sunny yellow bahn xeo ($11) was a savory-sweet filling of pork caramelized with palm sugar and toasted coconut. The "sizzling pancakes," as they're described, were eggy enough to be a breakfast omelet, but just pocked and spongy enough to be mistaken for Ethiopian injera.

"It's rustic, peasant food," said Hem about the dishes they feature at Royal Pig. "But as with any other culture, peasant food is … very flavorful and enjoyable for tons of people."

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During the pandemic, an increasing number of existing restaurant owners, largely in the fine dining realm, have gone the pop-up route as well. They've taken sharp detours from their regular menus to explore completely new and creative ideas - such as playful odes to chain food by Alewife, patio burgers and lobster rolls from Grisette, Jersey subs and red-sauce Italian fare at Heritage, and Metzger's throwback to the classic American steakhouse.

For Thomas Owens of Saison, a Korean-inspired pop-up was a break from the constraints of pandemic cooking. "The fact that we're open and just cooking sandwiches all day, it's definitely a little hard to remember why this is so much fun all the time," admitted Owens. "So doing something that we can be excited about is obviously great. It shakes up the monotony of our current weeks."

Owens' lifelong affection for Korean food began with his father, who served overseas in Korea during the '60s. Saison's chef de cuisine recently set out to learn more about the cuisine through independent research and experimentation. So given the opportunity to stage his own pop-up, Owens landed on "a love song to Korean food from me."

For his May pop-up, Owens chose to keep the dishes fairly traditional, while finding creative flourishes - including wild green strawberries as garnishes and French techniques for Korean sauces - to sprinkle in here or there. "I didn't want to be too off-putting as a white man doing Asian cuisine," he said.

In signature Saison fashion, the Korean dishes that Owens rolled out tasted as bold and colorful as they appeared. For his take on ganjang gejang, traditionally prepared with raw crabs, soft shells ($15) were steeped in soy and fish sauce. They exhibited a little extra funk, showered by pungent flecks of dehydrated onions and black garlic.

Jumbo-sized, double-fried chicken wings ($12) were lacquered with garlicky red chili sauce. The wings had been dredged in a mix of sweet potato starch and rice flour before frying, giving them an unmistakable trace of nutty sweetness.

Bulgogi-marinated hanger steak ($24), charred to a cindery finish, was tender and flavorful, with sharp accents of kimchi cabbage and carrots and rice wine-pickled green strawberries. The steak was to be eaten as a ssam - bundled in pouches of bibb lettuce together with some of the pickled vegetables and a dab of salty, fishy ssamjang, bolstered by Chinese fermented soybeans and black garlic.

One of Owens' favorite riffs on Korean food that wasn't on his pop-up menu? Kimchi stew crowned with a piece of seared foie. But diners will have to wait a bit longer for that one. "If we ever get out of this [pandemic]," he promised, "I'll have it around for sure."

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Phelan and Longoven co-owners Andrew Manning and Megan Fitzroy are certainly no strangers to pop-ups, or "glorified camping, as we used to call it," said Phelan. Before erecting Longoven's esteemed temple of plated, modernist cuisine in 2018, the trio was already enlightening the Richmond dining scene through a series of pop-ups at Sub Rosa Bakery, The Veil Brewing Co., and Ardent Craft Ales.

After closing Longoven in mid-March, Phelan, Manning, and Fitzroy knew that, if they were to reopen during the pandemic, it would not be as some form of "Longoven to-go." So when they did relaunch on May 17, instead of endeavoring to squeeze a square peg into a round hole - or in this case, modernist cuisine into a takeout container - they decided to return to their roots as a pop-up.

Longoven's new Brasa pop-up centers on wood-fired, Spanish and Portuguese-inspired cuisine. Brasa, meaning "ember" in Portuguese, was a concept that Manning originally developed in 2017, inspired by the 12 to 13 years he'd spent in Europe.

The rusticity of Brasa's dishes not only translates well logistically for takeout, in terms of preparation and cost, said Phelan. They also reflect a culinary approach - "a quickness with fire," as he put it - that speaks deeply to Phelan and Manning as chefs.

Cooking over a blazing fire, contending with hot zones and continually moving ingredients around and feeling them, is "just a kind of primitive way of interacting with food that I think you lose some days in the modern, sterile kitchen of water baths," he said. "It's just a fun way to cook."

Recently, at Brasa, whole chickens ($25) got a full-body rubdown with punchy, peppery piri piri. The juicy, copper-toned birds, hung like laundry directly over the fire, were awash in the fragrant smoke of red oak.

Grilled pork chops ($18) were tinged red like bricks in a marinade of espelette peppers, paprika, and oniony hot sauce and slathered with extra-perky ramp chimichurri.

And cooked on a cast iron pan, bedded over hot coals, were angel's wings of skate ($18) that had been gently lifted by a heavenly breeze of tarragon, pureed in olive oil with other spring herbs.

Brasa's connection to fire - and the quest to tame it - somehow feels symbolic as well, of the trial by fire that Longoven and other restaurants have endured throughout the pandemic. We've stood "on the precipice, on the edge of losing everything," said Phelan. Since Longoven's return as a pop-up to the dining scene, he and his team have felt a renewed sense of determination. "You just find yourself approaching your work with a level of passion and seriousness - that this is all you've got and you better take it seriously."

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**Heated and covered Richmond patios: Winter is coming, but Richmond restaurants have got us covered**

Along with indoor dining alternatives during the pandemic, such as takeout and delivery and to-go cocktails, outdoor patios have been a godsend for many local restaurants.

Business generated by restaurants from outdoor patio dining "is probably half the reason most of those restaurants are still alive," says Richmond restaurateur Johnny Giavos.

Even as the city braces for cold and occasionally soggy weather, the prospect of dining inside a restaurant is not something every Richmonder is ready to entertain. So, to prepare for the winter, many restaurants have begun weatherizing their outdoor areas with lamppost heaters, folding umbrellas, retractable awnings, canopy tents - whatever they can afford to get their hands on.

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Little Nickel, 4702 Forest Hill Ave.

Little Nickel, Giavos' Polynesian tiki-themed diner on the South Side, got an entirely new floating patio in July. Built on a slope, the patio juts out from the front of the restaurant like a rock concert stage.

All in, to erect and heat the patio, the project cost nearly $25,000. And that doesn't even include the greenhouse roof Giavos plans to add in the coming month. Fair to say, it's a calculated risk, one he hopes will enable the restaurant to achieve the volume it needs to stay open.

The patio may not give diners that tropical tan they're after. But armed with industrial heater towers, both propane and electric, and a roof, it should help them escape the winter for a bit - at least on those moderately cold days, Giavos says. Pack in a few pupus and tropically inspired finger foods, and diners are sure to find themselves in a wintry mood that's more Bing Crosby's "Mele Kalikimaka" and less "White Christmas."

For an improvement on Hawaiian pizza, I highly recommend a big, beautiful mess of nachos ($14), hosed with queso blanco and cilantro crema and heaped in a colorful rainbow of grilled pineapples, bacon, tomatoes, pickled red onions, and jalapeños. And if you don't mind fingers as sticky as a flytrap, the wings ($11), glazed in thick, tangy General Tso's sauce and faintly scented with citrus peel, were practically born ready for a couple of tiki drinks.

Cap things off with a slice of coconut haupia custard pie ($7) on a salty-sweet graham cracker crust. It's just like the ones you'd find at mom-and-pop bakeries along the coastline of Hawaii's North Shore.

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Sen Organic, 2901 W. Cary St.

On top of building out the patio since May, Sen Organic owner Hang Pham and her staff started adding tent coverings in September, an investment that has already cost nearly $10,000 (not including the outdoor heaters).

"We kind of saw where things were heading in terms of restaurants reopening but only allowing outdoor seating, and we wanted to make that investment," says hostess and part-time server Hannah Aronson.

Sen Organic's parking lot-turned-garden oasis is now a makeshift fort of tenting with ornamental windows - and actual openings, of course, for proper ventilation. Still, the space retains a spalike tranquility. The commercial hubbub of Carytown disappears, fading into the soothing patter of jazz piano.

A meal here promises to clear one's winter-weary mind. Practice deep breathing techniques, while inhaling the gentle vapors from a bouquet of jasmine, chrysanthemum, and globe amaranth flowers that blossoms as it steeps into a meditative green tea ($6).

An assortment of phos, bun hues and other Vietnamese soup noodles supply their own form of aromatherapy, with nourishing bone broths (and vegan alternatives) formulated with herbs and spices and possessing seemingly mystical properties.

The "master pho" ($37), made for two people or one unusually hungry person, is presented on a wooden dais in a steamy cauldron of fragrant, soulful beef broth. The vessel brims with earthen vermicelli noodles, fresh herbs and other hidden riches - a fried egg that pours its yolky heart out, oxtails so collagenous and achingly tender, and a shaggy beef short rib as long as the bowl is wide. This dish not only warms the body but also calms the spirit.

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Grisette, 3119 E. Marshall St.

Those who've driven by Grisette in Church Hill lately almost certainly will have noticed what can only be described as hillbilly cabanas, pitched out front on the sidewalk since mid-October. Each 6-by-6-foot private dining tent comes lighted and equipped with its own picnic table and adjustable overhead heater. To maintain airflow, the front and rear flaps are scrolled up during dinner service.

For owner Donnie Glass, whose ingenuity and make-do spirit he attributes to his time in the military, these tents, designed as portable yard garages, are about "function over fashion." And at $300 apiece for the whole shebang, lights and heaters included, they're budget-friendly, too.

"They're not real pretty, but they're not real ugly. Right now, I'll take that," Glass says. "And they seem to work."

Just as cozy and weather-appropriate is Grisette's winter menu. Granted, the restaurant's smorgasbord of ripe cheeses and decadent charcuterie ($29) and brimming cupfuls of frites ($4.50) - still lustrous from their dip in the deep fryer (and for which I suggest requesting a side of Glass' signature béarnaise) - have always gone well with any season.

But I can't imagine a more fitting occasion for snuggly dishes like duck confit swathed in creamy mustard sauce ($19). The duck, its skin still shatteringly crispy, is also rendered unfathomably luscious. Nested over roasted winter vegetables and stewed apples, it's the kind of fare that, much like a cassoulet or choucroute garnie, buries the chill of winter beneath rich, slowly cooked layers of game and hardy vegetables. It'll have you thinking of rustic hunting lodges and roaring fireplaces.

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River City Roll, 939 Myers St.

With a sticker price of roughly $30,000, River City Roll's winterizing campaign toward the end of November stands as one of the most expensive and high-tech around town. Diners can now enjoy the outdoor patio, while impersonating a lobster thermidor under a broilerlike panel of overhead heat lamps. The six lamps, each 25 feet long and mounted to the steel-beamed roof, emit gas-powered, infrared heat.

"The heaters are super hot," acknowledges marketing director Heather Nicholas.

Given the popularity of its patio, installing such a powerful heating system was an absolute necessity for River City Roll. "The outdoor dining piece is a huge part of why we are able to stay open, even though we're just scraping by," Nicholas says.

Perhaps as seriously as it takes its heated patio, this Scott's Addition adult bowling alley, despite its "barcade" vibe, doesn't play around when it comes to the food. Everything here is familiar, only better.

French fries ($9), anointed by truffle oil, get dusted with shaved egg yolk and Parmesan for added nudges of umami. Harissa-sauced wings ($12) have a spicy Tunisian twang that leaves me questioning my allegiance to the all-American buffalo wing. And flaunting about with a far more ephemeral crunch than your typical chickie sando is their version of a fried chicken sandwich ($10), its performance only elevated by piquant high-kicks of flavor from some pickled cukes and hot sauce.

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Longoven, 2939 W. Clay St.

Longoven's garden patio in Scott's Addition - with its Scandinavian meets Sonoma wine country design aesthetic - seems to have evolved as effortlessly as the change of seasons. Last I wrote about it, as summer was winding down, the patio was an elegant, wood-paneled box with no lid. In September, a latticed roof frame magically appeared above the patio, sheathed in clear corrugated plastic and raised slightly to allow air to flow through.

Behind the scenes, the decision to build that roof meant closing Longoven for several days and spending thousands of dollars, eating into half a month of the restaurant's operating capital. But for a restaurant that was no longer offering indoor dining, it was worth the effort.

"August was extremely wet. We lost a lot of business in August. And so we finally made that commitment for the long haul just to get a covering on it," owner Patrick Phelan says. "Looking back on it now, I wish I would've just done it from the beginning."

Despite these changes, one thing holds true: the Longoven patio's power to charm the thermal socks off diners. Every table gives diners the sensation of being nested in their own private alcove, framed by lush foliage. Twinkling garden lights are strung in clean, Nordic lines above them.

And wonders never cease when it comes to the food at Longoven. With an approach both masterful and imaginative, Phelan and co-chef and owner Andrew Manning conjure a silken custard out of sunchokes ($15), combining elements of a Japanese chawanmushi and au gratin potatoes. The custard is sprinkled with a heady gravel of fried ginger and garlic and crushed hazelnuts and gossamer shavings of smoked pumpkin and black truffle.

These wizards of modernist cuisine also transfigure dendritic heads of maitake ($14) by grilling the mushrooms until they're nearly as smoky as the bark on a slab of barbecued brisket, then floating them atop a seawater dashi steeped with kombu. And a cluster of raw, juicy oysters ($16) is transformed, swirled in a snowdrift of cream made from sweet Hakurei turnips and swept up by a strong, iridescent undercurrent of X.O., a Cantonese-inspired chili sauce fortified with salty dried shrimp and scallop and specks of prosciutto.

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It's hard to say whether outdoor patios will sustain various restaurants and diners alike through the coldest winter months of the pandemic.

Glass, for one, remains optimistic. "If last winter was any indication, I think it'll be fine," he says. "And if we catch a 'cold' winter, how long does that cold snap stick around for? I don't know, three weeks, four weeks. We can survive three or four weeks."

Other owners, such as Giavos and Phelan, are less definitive about the future. "At some point, it's going to get cold - when you run to your car in the morning - it's going to get that cold," Phelan says. "I imagine in the months to come, we'll challenge what 'too cold' actually means to somebody."

Another question looms: What will happen to these winterized outdoor patios once the pandemic is over? Some restaurants have been authorized to operate patios only temporarily on adjoining sections of city sidewalks and parking lots. And it's unclear if they will have to remove those patios - into which they may have poured thousands of hard-earned dollars - when all is said and done.

"It's a Catch-22," says Giavos, about investing in an outdoor patio. "I don't want to do too much and, when this is over with, I've got to pull down $30,000 worth of stuff because the city won't allow me to keep it."

For now, with restaurant dining completely upended by the pandemic, the option of dining outdoors in any capacity feels like a blessing for everyone involved. And the best any of us can do is persevere - to don our warmest coats, our chunkiest sweaters, our longest long johns, and our thickest socks and simply order the stiffest drinks on the menu.

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