

## **Restaurant review: Celladora Wines in the Fan is also a restaurant where edible wonders flow**

Gracing the far wall of Celladora Wines, an intimate wine shop and restaurant in the Fan District, is a sweeping mural, commissioned from local artist Olivia Wilson. Wilson's wall art, a fetching fresco of color alternating like the layers of a boho-inspired geode, is an obvious statement piece.

But exactly what statement is it trying to make? Is the mural meant to represent the varying moods of natural wine, which I maintain is a plausible theory given that this is, after all, a natural wine shop? Or is it, as my husband contends, an abstract expression of earth and sea?

Owner Megan Lee Hopkins offers an alternative explanation. Maybe, she suggests, there's no meaning to it at all. Maybe it's just something beautiful for people to freely appreciate on their own terms.

That statement doesn't just apply to the mural in Hopkins' store. It's also the whole ethos of the place.

When it comes to wine, as with art, folks are too often worried about missing the point. Amateur wine drinkers are so hung up on getting it "right" and not looking dumb that they stop thinking for themselves. Their sense of personal enjoyment is lost. They're swayed by what experts tell them to think, instead of letting the wine in their glass speak directly to them.

Hopkins wants to break them of that.

"My No. 1 philosophy here is making people feel comfortable about talking about wine, about trying wine, about not being wrong or not knowing enough," she says. "We will never

taste anything in the same way. ... That's kind of the magic of it."

All who enter are invited to come at the subject with an open mind. Hopkins deliberately avoids tasting-note labels, which tend to lead consumers on a pre-charted course rather than an interpretive path of their own making.

Her preferred method is to grab a glass and sit side-by-side with people, like a shaman, guiding them through free-flowing conversation as they swirl and sip their vino. She might ask questions to prompt deeper thoughts about the wine but refrains from planting ideas in people's heads.

"The process can't be rushed," she says. There's no sales counter here for a reason. Customers can certainly scurry out of her store with a bottle in tow, as they would at any other retail wine shop. But they're less likely to get as much out of their experience that way.

The optimal Celladora experience calls for food. Cue Ben Burakoff, Hopkins' chef-in-residence.

A relative unknown in Richmond restaurants, having worked at a mishmash of places, such as Rappahannock, Barrel Thief wine shop and Sub Rosa bakery, Burakoff has curated an entire array of edible wonders to highlight the stunning naturalness of the wines.

How Hopkins has managed to squeeze a fully operational galley kitchen into such a tiny space is beyond me. With bottle-lined bookshelves for browsing, a cozy reading nook, and just enough seats for 14 people at picture windows serenely overlooking Lombardy Street, the place looks more like a humanities professor's private library.

But therein lies the beautiful deception of Celladora. Like an elusive Trojan horse, under all its wine-shop clothing is a full-fledged restaurant and, dare I say, one of the best to open this past year. What this contemporary cave à manger — the French concept of a “wine shop that serves food” — lacks in size, it makes up for in the sheer brilliance of its own intimate design.

With every dish, Burakoff conveys a discrete montage of flavors that unfold on their own with little human intervention — which, meaningfully enough, mirrors the same philosophy that undergirds the natural wine movement.

Feel the bright, tantric pulse of lemongrass and makrut lime, awakening a bowl of toasted cashews (\$6). And think of brisk ocean air and beachside fires, while you tuck into some smoked trout dip (\$14).

Behold warm flashes of shawarma spice, energizing a tabbouleh-inspired tartare of beef and bulgur wheat (\$18). Then brace yourself for brooding storm clouds of cumin, hanging over stir-fried heads of bok choy, as they collide into a vortex of labne stoked with raw garlic (\$12).

There’s no artifice in Burakoff’s presentation of dishes or heavy-handedness in their preparation. The flavors speak for themselves.

In a trifecta of dips (\$14), served with toasted fan blades of boule from Sub Rosa, Burakoff fully embraces the refined bitter edges of smoked eggplant in the baba ghanoush; he leans into the innate sweetness of pomegranate and red peppers in the romesco-like muhammara; and he welcomes the wild, untamed zeal of dill in the tzatziki.

The chef presents a dynamic portrait of ceviche (\$18) by singeing opaque slivers of raw flounder with citrus, burying them beneath a dense mound of cilantro and planting mini land mines of oil-cured black olives and dewdrop peppers set to detonate at unexpected intervals.

And he conjures a bold, Nordic spirit through his surprisingly dill-rich version of shrimp and grits (\$26), projected against a backdrop of the American South, as reflected in seasonal offerings of corn, pimentos, collards and tomatoes.

Burakoff's seared fluke dish (\$22) offers two compelling visions for our consideration. The first: gentle ribbons of fluke that have barely kissed the pan, bolstered by vibrant green herbs and garlic-laced yogurt sauce. The second: a festive blend of nixtamalized corn and crunchy tortilla bits, tied into a sultry salsa roja, like a loosely formed tamale. Unfortunately, these visions, lovely as they are, feel as if they're better off existing on different planes, not on the same plate.

Burakoff, on Sundays, breathes his creative artistry into brunchtime classics as well. He lends the Midas touch to a simple flapjack (\$14), which he transforms into a bronzed-gold hubcap of cake-y, griddled batter, mounted with butter and pralines.

He injects the lightness of the heavens into an eggs Benedict (\$16), elevated by a supremely airy crumpet and a frothy hollandaise that sings a happy hallelujah chorus of lemon.

And he achieves a wondrous feat of dive-bar alchemy, by amping up an old-school roller dog (\$12) with enough kimchi and bacon to cure a hangover.

To truly appreciate one's time at Celladora, it's best to let the experience unfold like a long and rapturous dream. Be open to wherever the moment takes you and whatever it might bring. Allow these visions of food and wine to stir your senses. Resist the urge to overthink them. And, above all, just enjoy their beauty.

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### **First Bite: Young Mother pop-up brings together a fascinating mix of Japanese and Korean cuisine**

At Young Mother, the monthly Japanese-inspired pop-up conceived and hatched out of Restaurant Adarra, Daniel Harthausen's steamed egg dish says it all.

The silken custard that the 26-year-old phenom serves in an earthen vessel is ostensibly Japanese chawanmushi. But like everything else that springs from Harthausen's brain, there's more going on with the dish — a complexity he subtly reveals to us through meaningful gestures of flavor, texture and ingredients.

The rich umami of dried anchovy broth bolsters the egg. But unlike chawanmushi, it's not as delicate. It's markedly firmer, more robust, a small yet significant detail that Harthausen imparts to the dish to make us think of gyeran-jjim, the Korean counterpart to chawanmushi. Poured like epoxy over the surface, an X.O. sauce of dried scallops and jiri anchovies elicits the kind of full-bodied flavors one would find in Sino-Korean food.

Japanese and Korean cuisines, Harthausen observes, often employ what are essentially the same ingredients in similar ways. Adding fish-based stock to eggs, for instance, is done

in both culinary traditions. Why not highlight these commonalities while simultaneously reflecting their dualities?

With just a tiny ocean separating the Korean peninsula from the Japanese archipelago, it's no wonder these two cultures have such an entangled history fraught with geopolitical animosity. At the same time, these entanglements have also led to shared food practices that Harthausen yearns to make more sense of.

Through *Young Mother*, Harthausen navigates the borderlands of Japanese and Korean cuisines, negotiating their differences while forging connections no other Richmond chef has thought to explore. Diving ever so boldly into this culinary no man's land, he emerges with dishes that convey extraordinary depth of insight.

"I'm not going to say that my food's going to heal the relationship between the two countries," says Harthausen. That said, he hopes his cooking will help people appreciate the similarities between traditional Japanese and Korean cuisines and, in that sense, bridge the divide between the two cultures.

"I don't want to just mash two dishes together and call it Japanese-Korean," he explains. "I'm trying to find correlations that exist because of history." This history, including decades of Japanese annexation in Korea, has invariably influenced "the way that people eat" in both countries. The intersection between the two "is something that's pretty apparent."

Call it diplomacy or sheer culinary genius, the end results are delicious.

The reason many Richmond diners, especially newer transplants like myself, may not be familiar with Harthausen's culinary talent is because he's been out of the kitchen for over four years. After a demoralizing experience running his first restaurant kitchen at Richmond's Yaki, Harthausen needed to take a break. He wound up working, instead, on the service side of the food industry as a server, bartender, barista and manager.

It was during the pandemic that Harthausen, now bar manager at Adarra, realized he wanted to be a chef again. His hiatus had given him a chance to reset and really home in on his vision for Young Mother.

"I always wanted to go back to doing Japanese cuisine," Harthausen says. And that time away from cooking "allowed me to be very thoughtful about it." "Everything I do," he adds, "I want it to move meaningfully."

What's clear is that, in making his grand return, Harthausen is laying it all on the table, producing dishes that are equally thought- and palate-provoking.

As with his chawanmushi (\$13), Harthausen's so-called gyoza (\$10) are scrumptious little mind-benders that force the imagination to wander between Japanese pan-fried dumplings and chubbier varieties, such as Korean mandu and even Shanghai sheng jian bao. Their doughy shawls are cinched into a swirl around plump, juicy meatballs of pork and shrimp. A salty, punchy broth of douchi — a nod to the common use of fermented beans in Korean and Japanese cooking — pools under the cluster of dumplings.

Okonomiyaki (\$19), a griddled discus of thickly shredded cabbage, veers somewhat in the direction of a Korean-style pajeon, in terms of its crispy thinness. Meanwhile, grated

mountain yams, which Harthausen folds into the pancake batter, keep this savory Japanese classic delightfully buoyant and springy. And, of course, nothing says okonomiyaki like squiggles of kewpie mayo and Worcestershire-tanged sauce and a fluttering sea of bonito flakes.

Under the foggy-white guise of a tonkotsu broth (\$14) brewed from pork bones and fatback and presented in a petite iron cauldron, Harthausen cleverly conceals a reference to seolleongtang, one that anybody who's ever been to a Korean tofu house will catch onto. Floating among the nimbus clouds of creamy broth are boiled swatches of beef brisket. Also cluing you in is a saucer of gingery radish kimchi meant to stagger every sip of broth with jolts of freshness and spice.

The yakisoba (\$18) may be the only dish in which Harthausen doesn't inject any culinary double entendre, though I suppose the flatter, wider girth of the noodles could be a discreet nod to Korean knife-cut kalguksu. All that matters, though, is how sublime his rendition of this dish is. The eggy noodles get sloshed in tangy-salty yakisoba sauce *monter au beurre*, with enticing amounts of butter (and schmaltz) for a luxuriously glossy sheen. The crown jewels of this platter are fragmented chicken thighs that have been crisped in the pan until their skins give off the same melodious crackle of Peking duck.

More than just a vehicle for his cooking, Harthausen's exploration of the liminal space between Japanese and Korean cuisines is also a poignant expression of personal identity. The Young Mother chef identifies as Korean American but also found out later in life that he's of Japanese descent. He was born in Seoul, Korea, but also lived in Okinawa, Japan, during high school.



“Zainichi” is a term commonly ascribed to Koreans who, as Harthausen once did, live in Japan. The term, it seems, is a fitting description of Harthausen’s cooking style as well: that of a Korean chef creatively inhabiting his own space in Japanese cuisine.