

EXQUISITE TASTE

November 23 – 29, 2022 c-ville.com  @cville_culture  facebook.com/cville.weekly

**Tavola's Alicia Simmons
balances tradition with
creativity and kindness**



TRISTAN WILLIAMS

“I love cooking for all the foodies [in this area], people who appreciate our open kitchen and seeing how hard we work.”

ASK ALICIA SIMMONS ABOUT HER HAPPIEST

childhood memories, and she immediately recalls the many hours spent in the kitchen with her twin sister and grandmother at the family’s farm in the Shenandoah Valley. “We made lunch for dad and grandpa every day,” says Tavola’s executive chef. “That’s how I fell in love with cooking.”

Growing up on a farm formed Simmons’ appreciation of food because she knew the hands that touched every morsel she helped prepare and then consumed, the amount of work it took to get an ear of corn from a seed in the ground to her plate. “Farmers,” she says, “are more appreciated now than they used to be. But growing up, farmers were my heroes.”

Her grandfather was a dairy farmer who grew a variety of crops, and also raised ducks, pheasant, and trout. “I was lucky to see it all,” says Simmons, 28, adding that it came as little surprise to anyone when she enrolled in the culinary arts program at Valley Career & Technical Center.

“Basically, we had a little restaurant at valley vo-tech, which set you up to work in a bigger restaurant,” says Simmons, who quickly increased her knowledge of prepping and cooking and pricing everything out. She says it was a great foundation, something she built on when she graduated from Piedmont Virginia Community College’s culinary arts program several years later. More importantly, though, her vocational training confirmed what she’d known since she was a child: She wanted to cook professionally.

Soon after graduating from PVCC, Simmons landed a job making salads at Staunton’s Newtown Baking & Kitchen, where she worked alongside Chicano Boy Taco owner and former Zinc executive chef Justin Hershey.

But it was her pastry work—she’d fallen in love with dessert-making while at VCTC—plus a recommendation from Hershey that led Simmons to

Tavola in 2015. In addition to making desserts at the popular Belmont restaurant, she prepped food and helped serve private events. Soon, she was working on the line and putting together salads for Tavola’s then-chef de cuisine Caleb Warr, “a great mentor who took me under his wing and really showed me how a chef is also a teacher,” says Simmons. “He was so patient, and took the time to show me all the little things.” Eventually promoted to sous chef, Simmons was named the Italian eatery’s executive chef in 2021.

On a typical day, she arrives at Tavola around 11am to receive the day’s food orders (many of the restaurant’s ingredients come from local farms, and its specials are based on what’s in season), and begin prepping, which means everything from baking bread or cheesecake to preparing sauces or butchering half a pig.

“That’s the joy of it,” says Simmons, who earned Best Chef honors in this year’s Best of C-VILLE competition. “And I love cooking for all the foodies here, people who appreciate our open kitchen and seeing how hard we work. They see it all go down, and they like the food even more [because of it].”

Simmons prides herself on preparing some of the area’s finest cuisine (linguine alla carbonara, anyone?), but she also makes it a priority to share her culinary knowledge, scoffing at those TV and movie chefs who terrorize their kitchen employees.

“Nobody appreciates going to work and being yelled at,” Simmons says. “I had great teachers coming up. And I want to reflect the way my grandma, Justin, Caleb, and [Tavola co-owner and chef] Michael Keaveny treated me. You need to enjoy your job to enjoy cooking. A big part of what I do is take the time to show everyone else how it’s done, so they can take what they learn and teach someone else and keep the ball rolling.”—Susan Sorensen

Alicia Simmons prides herself on preparing some of the area’s finest cuisine, and she says part of her job is teaching others.



TRISTAN WILLIAMS

THE SEASONS



TRISTAN WILLIAMS

In the Tavola kitchen: Janey Gioiosa, Ryan High, Brandon Miller, Alicia Simmons, and Kendall Moore

A MENU IS A CANVAS FOR EXECUTIVE CHEF

Alicia Simmons, who presents Through the Seasons, a thoughtfully crafted dining experience, every three to four months at Tavola. The seasonal one-day-only dinner is filled with the restaurant's recent daily specials, prepared in collaboration with chef de cuisine Kendall Moore. Simmons typically handles the dessert course, while Moore flexes his skills on the mains, both supported by a talented line of cooks.

At their most recent dinner in September, the first plate—an “amuse” or quick appetizer—consisted of a homey and warm English muffin with anchovy butter, a salted tomato and shiso taco, crisp in taste and soft in texture, and a fragrant and bold cannoli of squash and mascarpone. It was all paired with a sparkling red Patrick Bottex Bugey-Cerdon La Cueille wine, and my palate was ready for the sumptuous flavors to follow.

The antipasti offered multiple options, including roasted oysters with tomato caper relish and crispy calamari with grilled peaches, blistered shishito, Meyer lemon, and caper aioli. The oyster was so buttery and smooth that I wanted to sip it right out of the shell, and the pairing of a Domaine Michel

Tavola staff take advantage of Virginia's bountiful farms and shores to create decadent seasonal dinners. The next Through the Seasons event is on Monday, December 5.

Brégeon Muscadet was a nice soft companion with a pleasant silky taste. By contrast, the calamari, tender on the inside, was delicate and bursting with flavor from the caper aioli. Grilled peach was

an inspired element, adding some playful fruity notes, while the shishito peppers were savory and welcome, commanding my attention. This colorful dish was paired with a funky, bright, and slightly sour Sono Montenidoli Tradizionale.

For the entrata, I was treated to grilled halibut with heirloom caponata and basil and fennel salad, and a roasted duck breast with local cabbage and duck jus. The halibut was moist, tender, brusque, and delicious—flavorful but not in your face. Sweet in some places, the dish entertained my entire mouth, and paired nicely with a glass of Tenuta Terraviva MPH, a wine with mango and pineapple flavors and a clean finish. The roasted duck arrived with a strong, salty fragrance, a fatty cut with smooth texture and warmth, swimming in savory jus. The veggie pairings, dark and wispy, contrasted with the wilder duck, and came alive with a strong pour of Davide Carlone Boca.

Finally, the dolci, a blackberry mousse cake with chocolate cookie crumble was paired with an espresso Manhattan. The mousse, bright, fluffy, crunchy, and oh-so chocolatey, was a perfect match for the iced latte-like cocktail. I left with a fond memory of soft, whipped mousse and a bold coffee flavor—a whiff of an Italian café.—Richard DiCicco

BYRD'S-EYE



SUPPLIED PHOTO

VIEW

CHARLOTTESVILLE-BASED WELLNESS GURU

Renee Byrd was a successful influencer before being an influencer was cool.

Byrd launched her blog, Will Frolic for Food, in 2012. The goal was to “provide free tools for living well ... recipes, advice, yoga videos, and entertainment to sensitive souls.” In a few short years, she was working part-time hours while making a full-time income through advertisements and sponsored posts.

But a bout with illness and a dose of influencer fatigue began to fray Byrd’s enthusiasm. At the end of 2020, she stepped away from her successful blog, which had earned her notice from national outlets like the Food Network, Better Homes & Gardens, and Self, to focus on her personal life and well-being.

“The thing that bothers me is the culture around influence,” says Byrd. “It can be very egotistical and fake. Thankfully, a lot of the people I’ve worked with in the past in the food realm have been great. I’ve always thought, ‘If you are going to be an influencer, be in the food space; they are kind people that are there to be educators.’”

Now, married and living in Belmont with her beloved Australian sheepdog and a baby on the way, Byrd is plotting her way back into influencer culture.

After stepping away from Will Frolic for Food, Byrd continued to create content through comedy. With a background in theater and music, she has counted

Blogger and influencer Renee Byrd throws a bit of comedy and entertainment into her “recipes” for health and wellness.

herself an artist, photographer, writer, musician, yoga teacher, and entrepreneur over the years. To stay active, she developed an off-beat Insta-

gram presence doing comedic skits with characters like the insatiable Sugar Gollum and a cringey cohort of earnest commune members. She took on issues as heavy as abortion and as light as hiking sandals. She grew her Instagram following to nearly 40,000.

“My philosophy about comedy is to be true to your own perspective,” Byrd says. “I have been very deeply involved in the wellness and food industry, and I know a lot about all those worlds. I feel it’s important to be a voice within the food world, because there is a lot of bullshit.”

Her next step is to get back to Will Frolic for Food. While she finds so much of the food and wellness influencer space to be about “greenwashing” and selling under the guise of self-help—“there is so much stuff out there that you don’t need to be healthy or happy,” she says—she still believes in the power of the medium.

Byrd, who also runs Frolic Coffee at the Ix Farmers Market with her husband, a wellness coach by training, has always focused on free-form health journeys. Folks have to follow their own path to happiness, she says, and they can do so many things to improve themselves without spending any money.

“There is a lot of amazing work being done, but it’s buried,” Byrd says. “In the wellness and health and food world, you get the best results with self-led discovery. A lot can be done with a health coach, but they can’t just tell you what to do. Proper coaching is being a masterful asker of questions so people can come to their own conclusions. To reach your own unique, ideal health, some people need to run a lot, and some people need to walk a lot.” —Shea Gibbs



TIFFANY JUNG

Five dishes that will make a vegetarian feel loved

Eating out as a vegetarian can be disappointing, to say the least. While joints like GRN Burger and Botanical Fare have dedicated entire menus to tasty vegetarian and vegan eats, many restaurants only offer a token vegetarian dish. So for those who are tired of the seasonal vegetable plate, grain bowl, and mushroom risotto, we found five delicious dishes from area eateries that make dining out as a vegetarian fun.

Green Giant, Now & Zen Choosing what to order from Now & Zen's extensive veg menu can feel like an impossible task. Thankfully, our server came in with a clutch recommendation—the Green Giant. The extra-large sushi roll is stuffed with sweet potato tempura, cream cheese, avocado, and cucumber, and topped with spicy mayo, eel sauce, tempura flakes, and scallions.

Philly Cheeseshroom, Kitchenette This neighborhood sandwich shop is known for its meaty eats, particularly the Hot Wet Beef, but its vegetarian sandwiches are just as tasty. The Philly Cheeseshroom is a satisfying take on its meat counterpart, and features a blend of mushrooms sautéed with onions and roasted red peppers, provolone, shredded lettuce, and house mayo on a sub roll.

Kimchi Fried Rice, DOMA Korean Kitchen Eating DOMA's Kimchi Fried Rice is like having a delicious home-cooked meal, which is no surprise considering owners Imsook "April" Lee and her husband, Doyoung Moon incorporate recipes passed down from family members. The simple-but-flavorful dish is prepared with butter and spicy kimchi, topped with a fried egg, and served with doenjang soup. Take it to the next level by adding cheese and tofu.

Egg Paffle #1, Iron Paffles & Coffee This decadent, flaky waffle sandwich is the perfect brunch meal. Made with egg, cheddar, and house-made sriracha mayonnaise, the paffle is easily converted to vegetarian by substituting tempeh bacon for regular bacon. Iron Paffles' menu is entirely customizable, and offers alternative preparations for multiple allergies and dietary preferences.

Rigatoni Verdi con Zucca, Tavola It's all about the sauce with Tavola's rigatoni verdi con zucca. A sage-marsala cream ties together this seasonal dish, which features heirloom squash, mushrooms, pecorino, and amaretti crumble, served atop housemade pasta. The flavor is seriously unforgettable.—*Maeve Hayden*



EZE AMOS

WHAT'S



EZE AMOS

Chickadee brings day drinking to the Charlottesville food scene.

FOR

CHARLOTTESVILLE LOVES TO EAT. WITH A restaurant scene that prides itself on punching above its weight class, there is no shortage of options when an out-of-towner asks me the obligatory "where should we eat?" question. That list of options has evolved over the years, taking stock of the ever-changing landscape. The following is a highlight of some new arrivals.

Siren This spot for Mediterranean-inspired fare with an emphasis on seafood is the brainchild of Laura Fonner, a local chef who gained national attention when she took home the title on the Food Network's "Guy's Grocery Games." sirencville.com

Popitos Pizza Popitos is the newest addition to the Rio Hill Shopping center. The Zayas family serves up wood-fired pizzas, with a menu offering appetizers, salads, and signature pies with gourmet toppings like garlic confit and sea salt flakes. popitospizza.com

Kyoto Fifth Taste Kyoto, a fixture for Japanese cuisine in Charlottesville since 2005, has introduced a new concept: Fifth Taste. Under the direction of Chef Michelle Chang, the new menu allows diners to experience the healthy and delicious versatility of fermented foods. kyotofifthtaste.com

Mockingbird Melissa Close-Hart's new concept, Mockingbird, nests in the footprint of her former restaurant, Junction. Drawing from her southern Alabama roots, Close-Hart pulls in many favorites from southern cooking and adds new interpretations of classic flavors. mockingbird-cville.com

Smyrna New restaurateurs Orhun Dikmen and Tarik Sengul bring us Smyrna, a Mediterranean spot that highlights the eclectic flavors of the Aegean in the former Mangione's on Main location. smyrnacville.com

Chickadee When Bluegrass Grill vacated the Glass Building, many residents kept their eye on the space to see what would fill the shoes of the beloved cozy breakfast joint. Chickadee answered with breakfast offered all day, a full bar, and diverse lunch offerings. chickadeecville.com

Brightside Surfs up at Brightside in the Bebedero's former location above the Whisky Jar (Bebedero has moved a few doors down the mall). Brightside is a beach-inspired pub that offers patrons classic bar bites alongside an extensive tropical drink menu. cvillebrightside.dine.online

Umma's Jen Naylor, affectionately known as Mamabird, has been a staple at the farmers markets for years with her Sussex Farm stand. The lines of loyal foodies never seem to dwindle and her duck egg crème brûlée remains one of my favorite desserts of all time. Pair that with Kelsey Naylor (Jen's daughter) and her partner Anna Gardner who had been delighting crowds of their own with their food truck Basan, and you get Umma's. ummasfood.com

Birdhouse As cute as its name implies, this cozy brick restaurant at 711 Henry Ave. is bringing the bird. Offering whole, half, and quarter rotisserie chicken, the simple menu keeps the emphasis on the chicken plus a number of seasonal side dishes and a rotating dessert menu. birdhouse-charlottesville.com

Organic Krush A new location for the Organic Krush chain has a range of options for those looking to keep it healthy. With bowls, smoothies, and juices, there is something to meet numerous dietary choices and restrictions. organickrush.com

Ralph Sampson's American Taproom Local basketball legend Ralph Sampson has teamed up with Thompson Hospitality to open an upscale sports bar concept with an extensive beer list and a menu offering all the staples that pair perfectly with taking in the game on the big screens. americantaproom.com—*Carrie Meslar*

DINNER?