

HAPPY MEALS

Places and plates that satisfy our pleasure centers

By Eileen Mellon and Genevelyn Steele

FOOD TAKES US TO A HAPPY PLACE, LITERALLY.

When we eat certain foods, our brains release feel-good chemicals, and in turn, we're left feeling warm, buzzy and content. A dining trend we forecast for 2023 is an increase in that need for comfort: bites, sips and eateries that our bodies and souls crave — part indulgence, part therapy. When we need a reliable fallback that instantly rewards, from a cup at a cozy cafe to a curing Cantonese experience, these are places that serve up a dose of dining dopamine.



LUMPIA Auntie Ning's

Auntie Ning's is named after co-owner Frederico Enriquez's aunt, a former chef who introduced one of the first Filipino restaurants in Hampton Roads. Though spring rolls can be spotted on several menus at Asian eateries around town, lumpia, not so much. While Auntie Ning's food truck pops up around the region, I'm a frequent flyer at The Market on Meadow, a takeout eatery and small grocer that's home to both Auntie Ning's and Polpetti. Wrapped in foil like a shiny, sacred gift, the hot and crispy, crepe-esque handheld snacks are available in beef and veggie; unveiling them immediately rejuvenates the spirit. —EM



LET *it* FLOW

A Virginia trout farm is reviving the state fish and wowing local chefs in the process

By Eileen Mellon

PAN-PAVEL/GETTY IMAGES



BY EILEEN MELLON

PERSPECTIVE

Chain Reaction

Contemplating the role of the franchise in the Richmond dining scene

Chain restaurants hold a complicated place in diners' hearts. Dotting the map from coast to coast in the United States, they're familiar and nostalgic, the setting of many of our first restaurant experiences, yet undoubtedly the recipients of a little shade. Talking about visiting them — or, gasp, enjoying them — in today's dining world almost feels a bit naughty: Don't dare discuss too loudly and only among trusted friends.

In recent months, the Richmond area has seen an influx of chain establishments in the dining mix. Their debuts have been met with a mixed bag of emotions, from excitement surrounding free queso and scoops of ice cream at packed grand-opening events to comment threads on social media cursing chains and their investor-driven existence.

And while the local food scene has

only continued to blossom in the past decade and gained recognition as a destination for the culinary curious, what does this influx of businesses that perhaps have small beginnings but now boast big bank accounts mean for Richmond and its dining landscape? How does a restaurant industry that seems to be finding its stride again integrate these less-than-local concepts?

Like almost all aspects of life, there is no clear answer. I've typed and deleted and typed and deleted, trying to pinpoint and communicate a conclusion, but there are too many layers, it's a muddled situation, and we're on a deadline. During my reflection, I began to reminisce about my own tangled relationships with chain restaurants.

When I first moved to Richmond, I worked at the O'Charley's on West Broad Street. One of my roommates had landed me a hostess gig, and back then, I was

simply happy to get free pie and dinner rolls after working easy four-hour shifts.

When I was growing up, my uncle was an executive for Fleming's Prime Steakhouse, which meant that whenever we visited, he and my aunt would take us out to eat at one of the other concepts in the restaurant group. By the time I was 10, I had a standing order at Carrabba's Italian Grill — the dish remains on the menu decades later — and my brother and I never missed the chance to indulge in a Chocolate Thunder From Down Under brownie sundae at Outback Steakhouse for dessert.

Last year, I found myself at Texas Roadhouse with my boyfriend and his parents. His dad was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease in recent years, and, paired with the pandemic, the four of us had never gone out to eat together the entirety of our relationship. Shortly after ordering, we had to leave. The server >



JAMIE DOUGLAS