Norfolk’s pagoda re-opens with a new restaurant this summer.

Madeline sly remembers when the two-story octagonal pagoda was erected in her Norfolk neighborhood in 1989. “I watched it being built and it was just a beautiful ornate structure,” says Sly, who was at the time president of the Freemason Street Area Association.

Presented as a gift by the government of Taiwan following a 1983 trade mission to Norfolk, the pagoda was manufactured overseas then shipped to Norfolk.

Artisans from Taiwan meticulously constructed the pagoda at its location near the harbor—leading to its original name, the Marine Observation Tower.

Now, this “hidden treasure,” as Sly calls it, is about to debut a new restaurant. Noted Cordon Bleu-trained chef Phillip Craig Thomason, who owns Norfolk’s VINTAGE Kitchen restaurant and is also a Freemason resident, plans to open IMPERIAL around Labor Day.

According to Thomason, the first floor of the restaurant will offer “shareable plates focused on Spice Road street food,” like kale pad Thai and Asian nachos. IMPERIAL will also feature the region’s first dedicated champagne bar (with its own menu) on the second floor. The rooftop bar will offer 360-degree views of the Elizabeth River, the Battleship Wisconsin, the city skyline and the gardens that
surround the pagoda.

Sly played a significant role in the creation of the gardens. In 1998, with the support of the neighborhood association and the United Chinese-American Association, she organized the Friends of the Pagoda & Oriental Garden Foundation, and has long served as the group’s president.

“The pagoda had fallen into disrepair and was an eyesore for the neighborhood,” she explains. “We decided to pull together and create a beautiful wrapping for it.” The foundation re-designed the one-acre gardens, raised the nearly $1 million to create them, and unveiled the pagoda’s new setting in 2000.

Enclosed by serpentine walls with three Chinese gates, “The pagoda is the centerpiece for the Oriental gardens that surround it,” says Sly. Features include weeping willows, cherry trees, gushing waterfalls and a collection of bonsai nurtured by members of the Virginia Bonsai Society. A traditional crooked bridge crosses the large pond, which is filled with water lilies and koi. Inside the pagoda is an art gallery displaying paintings by members of the Blue Heron Chapter of the Sumi-e Society of America, a group that fosters East Asian brush painting techniques.

During the holidays, the pagoda is lit up for the city’s Grand Illumination; it is also the site for year-round special events, which benefit the pagoda and gardens. The grounds are open to the public free of charge. PagodaGarden.org