

DISTINCTION

Four Time Tested Favorites

By Ben Swenson DISTINCTION MAGAZINE Photography by Adam Ewing
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It's not too hard to find 15 minutes of fame, or at least favor, these days. Pull some outrageous stunt on social media. Put yourself front and center in the latest craze and you might be hot for a while. But endurance is the real feat. The right mix of work, patience and creativity has allowed the following restaurants to thrive in the increasingly competitive Tidewater dining scene.



Photography by Adam Ewing

Anthony Caruana challenges convention, mixing cuisines from different regions of Italy at Norfolk's Luce. Mushrooms might mix with peppers, for example. Here, kale and cherry tomatoes offset pork jowl and more.

LUCE

On the Mediterranean island of Crete is an ancient olive tree, one of the oldest in the world. It might seem this gnarled three-millennia-old tree has little to do with what diners love about restaurants here, but Chef Antonio Caruana can convince

you otherwise.

Last year he traveled to Crete, not just to see the tree – which is still bearing fruit – but to immerse himself in the culture. That tree represents thousands of years of inspiration and love. Caruana returned home eager to bring that to his kitchen. Field research like this helps Caruana set his dishes apart, so much so that people have packed his downtown Norfolk eatery, Luce, since it opened at the corner of West Tazewell and Granby streets in December 2013.

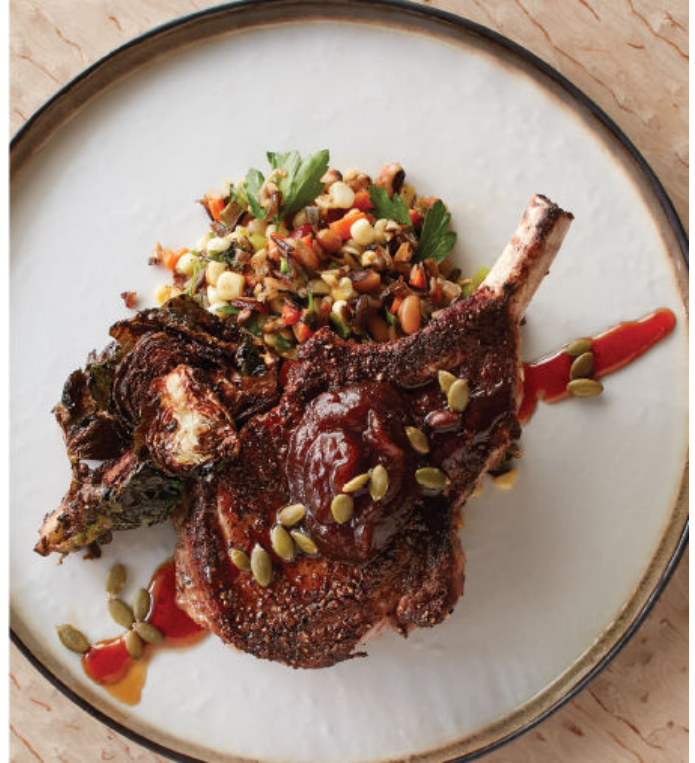
A handful of tables line one side of the long, narrow interior. The bar occupies much of the other side. Most of these spaces are taken every night, forcing people without reservations to spill outside and wait patiently for some of Caruana's carefully prepared dishes.

The chef is kind of an against-the-grain guy by nature, sculpted and tattooed, at ease in the saddle of his barking Harley-Davidson. So it's not surprising that his style challenges longtime conventions regarding keeping regional ingredients separate. But it is this mix of innovation and tradition that creates food that is both approachable and memorable.

A recent Caruana dish combined mushrooms, a staple in the northern regions of Italy, with peppers, common in the middle and south, all on a bed of tomatoes and spaghetti, effectively offering a taste of summer's best flavors from the entirety of the Italian boot.

Caruana's innovation casts itself, too, in Luce's Clams in Brodo, which moves beyond the Mediterranean entirely. Clams-in-shell and pepper bacon share a bowl with parsley and diced tomatoes, the fresh garden ingredients offering an interesting contrast to the meat. The broth beneath the pyramid also salutes Hatteras-style clam chowder, recognizable to many Tidewater diners.

Luce endures because it hits the right spots but also because it challenges the diner. "There are ingredients and techniques that were never fused because people said they didn't go well together," Caruana says. "But they should have been all along."



Photography by Adam Ewing

Erick Heilig likes to tinker with old standards at Eat, on the Oceanfront. His pork chop, for example, is a bone-in loin cut with dirty hash, crisp Brussels sprouts, and spiced apple butter.

EAT: AN AMERICAN BISTRO

Chef Erick Heilig's secret is not so much about combining rules as it is inventing his own. For eight years his Oceanfront restaurant, Eat: An American Bistro, has earned acclaim in Tidewater. Perhaps it's that Eat's concise dinner menu manages the tricky task of being both gourmet and homespun.

Despite being tucked in the shadow of a couple high-rise hotels, with good parking at a premium, Eat has a loyal base of local foodies. Three-fourths of his customers are regulars, he says, some of them driving from as far as the Peninsula or Richmond.

Eat traffics in classics that give every palate something to work with, such as New York strip steak, scallops and veggie lasagna. There are jazzy appetizers that nod to the ocean (think oysters Rockefeller) and greens for a lighter course (a warm baby spinach salad).

But a better explanation for the restaurant's popularity might lie in Heilig's reimagining of those dishes, which he says comes from trial and error. Though he likes to tinker, he has learned that a rambling menu would be distracting and many of the dishes, too obscure. "If I played all the songs here that I want to," he

says, “I wouldn’t have an audience.”

So he delivers standards with a twist. His pork chop, for example, features a generous bone-in loin cut cooked perfectly, and attractively placed on a bed of dirty hash and crispy Brussels sprouts. He adds a personal touch, topping the dish with spiced apple butter, which contrasts with the tender pork.

What makes Eat all the more endearing is that Heilig doesn’t take himself too seriously. The self-deprecation is evident in dishes such as My Mom’s Crabcake and The Hasselhoff, often pegged by diners as one of the best burgers in Tidewater, named for an embarrassing video of the actor for whom it’s named. The root of all these imaginative plates is classics that have undergone intriguing workmanship by a clever chef. “What I like to do is take something that’s recognizable,” Heilig says, “then upstage it.”



Photography by Adam Ewing

Naturally Smithfield ham is a featured player at Smithfield Station. But Brian, left, and Randy Pack deploy it subtly, as with a sweet potato-encrusted rockfish stuffed with ham and crab.

SMITHFIELD STATION

Sometimes recognition is not only a draw but a foundation. Smithfield Station has been a locavore oasis since it opened on the bucolic banks of the Pagan River in 1986.

Back then the menu featured spot, the little silver fish so common that there's no limit to how many you can catch in a day. Thirty years later, spot is off the menu, but the landmark restaurant still sources much of its seafood, says co-owner Brian Pack, "from Wanchese to the top of Chesapeake Bay."

Pack co-owns the restaurant and inn with his brother Randy. The duo took the reins from their father, who built it. (He still comes around, even in retirement.) The restaurant has always benefited from its location in a region with distinct culinary traditions, and in a town associated with a single food: ham – made here and smoked here, the aroma even wafting through the streets.

There's a cult of followers who relish this ham's lip-puckering saltiness, but the magic really happens in the fusions the Packs create by using it to accent well-known dishes. Typical is the sweet potato encrusted rockfish, stuffed with crabmeat and diced Smithfield ham. The Packs accessorize their landside courses with ham, too – tenderloin, a burger, fried chicken.

Many Smithfield Station dishes forgo that famed standard altogether and let Tidewater's cherished and succulent foods speak for themselves. Typical of such a classic is an incredible soft shell crab from Chuckatuck Creek. The Packs also pride themselves on their crab cakes, which Brian Pack says should be the measure of any restaurant's worth: "The main ingredients should be crab, crab and crab."



Photography by Adam Ewing

Tony Canaday, Dan Kennedy and Maxine Williams have hewed to tradition at Williamsburg's Old

Chickahominy House, with classics like Brunswick stew – and Canaday's ham biscuits.--

OLD CHICKAHOMINY HOUSE

Signature dishes at Old Chickahominy House have earned a permanent spot on the restaurant's menu in the same manner that the firebrands of old Williamsburg will always be part of the American story.

So it's no surprise that age-old, popular tradition, rather than change and innovation, has kept the Old Chickahominy House going through the years, despite the pressure of progress.

A location that used to be remote is now flanked by a four-lane highway, a gas station and a 7-Eleven. But the clapboard, Colonial-style building, a couple sycamores standing sentinel out front, has changed little since it went up in 1962. Likewise with the menu, which offers breakfasts and lunches that have had people coming back for years.

Maxine Williams, owner for 42 years, sold the place last year to Dan Kennedy, the general manager for almost a decade. This handover ensured that the Old Chickahominy House would continue without any interruption in quality or service.

"I bought this specifically so it would not change," Kennedy says. The restaurant's fare has long garnered acclaim from food critics. The ham biscuit – a couple thin rectangles of airy bread holding rich slices of country ham cured by legendary Surry proprietor S. Wallace Edwards & Sons – is the fifth best in Virginia, according to USA Today (although, says Kennedy, "I think we're actually first.")

Recognition for an item as ubiquitous as a ham biscuit is an accomplishment all its own, but remarkably, kudos come here for several favorites, including Miss Melinda's Pancakes, a light and tasty breakfast staple named for the original proprietress who put the restaurant on the map.

Her name also graces a lunch special, which features, among other items, Brunswick stew (although diners can take comfort that the meat is chicken, instead of the traditional 18th century filler, squirrel).

Another popular, and delicious, midday favorite is chicken and dumplings, cooked and served simply. "I think what appeals to people about these dishes is that they're like their mother used to serve," Williams says. "Sometimes, even better."