

Chartreuse Bistro

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PRECISELY CHARTREUSE

Two minds, one outlook: Couple marry spontaneity and exquisite care with local and organic at their European-style bistro

by JANINE LATUS *photography by* KEITH LANPHER

Christopher Corrie uses needle-nose tweezers to position quarter-inch cubes of roasted beet on tonight's terrine, a pate-like meatloaf of ground pork, bacon, eggs, cream, onions, herbs and brandy. At least that's what he thinks he put into it. He's too stubborn to use a recipe, says Karine Varga, his wife and partner in Chartreuse Bistro, a European-style restaurant in downtown Norfolk, where the menu changes daily based on what's available from their favorite farms.

"I haven't written any recipes down, since ... ever," Corrie says. "I know this ingredient goes with this, I'm tasting it all together and it tastes pretty darn good."

He moves around the kitchen like a dancer, smiling slightly as he balances a slice of apple – so thin you could read through it – on top of a tartlet cradling apples he's sautéed in butter and topped with a scoop of organic vanilla ice cream. On a separate plate he plays with the presentation, topping the ice cream with the pastry, just to see how it looks. Beside him Varga, 31, carefully washes each leaf of a head of butterhead lettuce.

"When you work in the kitchen you have to be on the same mind level," Corrie says, "and that works for us because we're married. She knows exactly what I'm thinking, then she runs out and manages the dining room at the same time."

Varga began working in food service in her early teens, scrambling up and down ladders at the old First Colony Coffee House that was managed by her sister, Ashli Carr. During high school she worked at Baker's Crust, and from there she moved to Cora's restaurant, on 21st Street next to Kotobuki, where a young man from Norway was washing dishes for free just so he could learn how to make sushi.

Corrie, now 31, whose father is from Alabama and whose mother is Norwegian, had moved here from Norway on a whim at age 19. He was sleeping on his half-brother's couch and eventually found work at Crackers and Empire, which is where the two met when Varga went in to visit her sister, who was also working there.

"You're the kid who works next door," Varga told him. "I didn't know I was attracted to him until I saw him working at Empire."

Varga had traveled to Europe every year, and it impressed her that Corrie had visited 20 countries. Together and

separately they moved through the local restaurant scene; in their decade together she has worked at Bobbywood and then as a manager at Press 626 Café & Wine Bar, while he cooked his way up to head chef at Kotobuki before moving on to One Fish Two Fish. Every year they took time off to travel and eat in Europe.

When they were bored they would play around on the computer, Varga creating budgets and schedules for their imaginary restaurant, Corrie making up menus. They wanted to create a place that served the kind of food they would eat – non-GMO, organic and in season. “The thing that frustrated both of us was the lack of seriousness,”

Varga says. “I’m very serious about making sure everyone gets the most detail-oriented, best experience we can control. We’re both pretty crazy about that.”

One day they walked into the space on East City Hall Avenue formerly occupied by the Brown Bag Café. L-shaped and tiny – the restaurant seats 27 inside, and six at sidewalk tables – the space felt European to them, especially with The Tide gliding by. It took them months to clean and remodel to create the look they wanted. Varga, who had studied visual arts at the Governor’s School, wanted the décor to look like a café you’d find in a European modern art museum, with simple lines, flowers and candlelight, and her own colorful monoprints on the walls.

They opened at the end of August 2013, sometimes using tomatoes and herbs from their home garden. The next summer there was no time to garden – Corrie comes in at 7 in the morning and doesn’t leave until after midnight – sc



instead they get their produce from Dave and Dee's Mushrooms, whose employees travel to farms in the area and provide Corrie with a list of what's available: local honey, perhaps, plus polenta and peanuts and mushrooms, and various kinds of squash. Those are the tools he uses to create. His daily lunch menu is done by 11, the dinner menu by 5, Varga screaming in frustration if the printer glitches. He makes a daily baguette of organic flour, and on their most recent trip overseas he learned how to make his mother's Norwegian sunflower seed bread, which he uses now for his tartines.



Chartreuse Bistro, a European-style restaurant in downtown Norfolk, tuna crudo.

"Some people have a really hard time learning a new plate every day," Corrie says, "but for me it's hard to do the same thing over and over and over again."

A lot of their customers are regulars. "We're a niche place," Varga says. "The people who come in want the local, the organic food, this atmosphere, and they're not worried about what's on the menu. They know it's going to be good."

Like the beet gratin, the sweet roots sliced thin, layered with cream and fennel and salt and pepper and left to bake. Or the smelt Corrie pickles with shallots, pink peppercorns, sugar and vinegar, and pairs with a horseradish creme fraiche over a slice of the toasted sunflower bread he made that morning. The grass-fed proteins come from Leaping Waters Farm, and he uses everything, curing pork bellies into bacon, simmering a pig head in a broth of aromatics for 20 hours, then picking out the meat and reducing the liquid until it's like Jell-O. This he pours over the picked meat and refrigerates it until it gels, so each slice of headcheese is a mixture of brains and tongue and cheek.

The tables fill two and three times a night, Varga shaking martinis of Green Hat Gin with a touch of dill and lemon, or pouring goblets of warm red wine as Corrie tongs hot pans out of the oven, sears a steak of local mahi mahi and stirs red cabbage caramelizing in butter.

Every night they're together, carefully cooking, attending to details, creating and serving good food as Pandora pays homage to

Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. They're artists, bringing a touch of Europe to their chosen hometown.

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Karine Varga and Christopher Corrie combine an intense focus on detail with a devotion to spontaneity.