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Patrick O'Connell Cooks Little Washington

By Leland Schwartz

The Inn at Little Washington pays the town of Washington, Va. (population, 87) more than $1 million a year in restaurant and lodging taxes. That's what one of the most famous chefs in the world told a rapt Chase Club audience at Leesburg's Hotel Burg, which also learned that this guy has a wicked sense of humor.

Patrick O'Connell said he worked on his new book, "Main. Middle & Gay" for 11 years and hoped it would never get published. He told the publisher he would write it on one condition:

That he got to change the names of all the people that were still alive.

"And I did", he said laughing, "but I was waiting out the people who I thought if I waited long enough, they'd all be dead."

"But then I thought, well, there's a catch to that!"

Right about then, Virginia writer Dawn Klavon asked the chef about the ups and downs he has had with the town. "How did you go from kind of being an outsider almost 50 years ago to now calling it home?"

"Well," O'Connell explained, "small towns are interesting. We now have a population of 87. About the size of this room, and there are plenty of disagreements and controversy."

Back then Little Washington -- protected by the mountains -- had two TV channels, "and one was static. The good stuff was on the static channel" he quipped. "That's when I first heard that the state flower of West Virginia was the TV antenna."

"They thought that that was their protection against the harsh realities of the outside world," O'Connell said, referring to Little Washington's residents.

"People from the outside world were called outsiders."

"If it had been a medieval town, it would have that large wall around it, but it had a psychological wall, and change was the greatest enemy, because change was always for the worst."

So "two guys come to the center of their town," he went on. "The corner of Main, Middle, and Gay. And they're not brothers," he said, cracking the whole place up.

"That's what the old timers called the us. 'I done met your brother,' and I said "whatever."



Photo; Leland Schwartz

Chef Patrick O'Connell jokes with a standing-room only audience at the Chase Club at Hotel Burg in Leesburg, telling them what life is like in Little Washington.

When they started serving food," he recalled, "outsiders start piling in. They didn't understand it. So it was a threat. So they had to stop it. They had to contain it. They had to control it."

The mayor at the time, O'Connell said, "was losing control of his dutchy, and he was the godfather. We had a godfather of the county, also, who he reported to. And they just went ballistic about anything we did or tried to do. And that carried on for 20 some years, at least."

The 'outsiders' still kept coming, he explained, and started buying weekend houses, causing property values to go up. "And they still didn't know what was happening. So they lost a certain control of their old village, but as I often say, worse things could have happened."

Now, O'Connell said, "we pay them a million dollars a year in food and lodging taxes. And property values are six times what they should be, or would be, in any normal town."

But, he added, "we never intended that. I just wanted to do what I loved doing as well as it could be done. So that was a side effect."

At this point, he said, "we've gone more or less full circle. There are a few holdouts, still fearing change, more change. So the mantra is, everything's fine .. so far. Just don't do anything else."

"So," he said, rollicking the room, "we just keep on doing something else."

As for the Executive Chef of the Hotel Burg and its Hunton restaurant -- award-winner Vincent Badiee, who prepared dinner for living ledgend O'Connell and dozens of members of the Chase Club -- he had this to say:

"I've been fortunate enough to fly close to the sun a few times throughout my career, and this was certainly one of those moments. To have the opportunity to cook for someone whose work helped shape my ambitions nearly two decades ago is an incredible honor. More than anything, I hope Chef Patrick felt the thought, care, and respect that our entire team poured into the experience."

"We wanted the food to speak for itself, not simply as a demonstration of technique, but as a genuine expression of gratitude and hospitality," Chef Badiee said.

