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Although sneaking around is all in a day's work for food critics, we decided to up the ante significantly for this issue by peeling back the curtain on some of the most closely-guarded dining opportunities around. From shining a light on congressional dining (we performed a check-and-balance on the seat of power that is The Members' Dining Room) to mixing things up at the late-night cocktail haven known as PX (quite possibly the only bar I've ever left feeling genuinely smarter), we lay bare all the epicurean secrets we witnessed and provide tips for conducting your own "investigations."

Patrick O'Connell's terrine of pistachio and white chocolate ice cream scored big with Chaine members (a heavenly send-off).



Confrerie de la Chaine des Rotisseurs

www.chaineus.org

Average entree: Over \$31 (\$\$\$\$).

"THIS is smelling the roses," my lunch companion shares while reveling in yet another awe-inspiring epicurean indulgence.

Welcome to the pleasures of breaking bread alongside the always inquisitive gullets—the Chaine des Rotisseurs.

The gourmet dining society first came into existence as a social outlet for medieval goose roasters. The organization went mainstream in the 1950s and now boasts members in over 70 countries and over 150 chapters in the United States.

Local Chaine chapters include Washington, D.C., Northern Virginia (Peripherique "Beltway") and Richmond, with a potential Winchester arm in the works.

In his "real" life, D.C. Bailli (regional leader) Paul S. Haar is an immigration law specialist who helps hospitality purveyors smooth over personnel problems. Within the Chaine, he gets to nurture the gourmet passions he cultivated while studying overseas.

"We educate people and give them amazing, off-menu meals," he says of the invite-only organization.

Francois Dionot, founder of L'Academie de Cuisine and D.C. Chaine board member, concurs, estimating that the Chaine's ability to secure multicourse extravaganzas and extraordinary wine pairings unattainable by the average diner is its greatest asset.

"La Chaine has been a vehicle to go to places where you can have an absolutely incredible dinner ... which, on your own you could never get," he argues.

According to Haar, it's the combination of the Chaine's prestige—"there's a lot of gourmet groups," he concedes, "but this one's been around for 800 years"—and its members' culinary savvy that restaurants really respond to.

"It's a fun group of people. No attitudes," Haar counsels.

And part of the fun appears to involve exploring the worldwide network of participating Chaine restaurants.

"As soon as you identify yourself, you know what your experience is going to be," Richmond chapter member Richard Farrell says of the "rock star" attention show-

RECENT CHAINE OUTINGS (D.C. CHAPTER):

2941

BLUE DUCK TAVERN

CITRONELLE

EQUINOX

MARCEL'S

RESTAURANT EVE

TOSCA

Paul Haar, head of the D.C. chapter of La Chaine des Rotisseurs, indulges in a little pageantry during a recent induction ceremony.



ered upon seasoned Chaine travelers.

"Suddenly you're a VIP," Frits Huntjens, Richmond Bailli and chef/founder of 1 North Belmont Restaurant, says of the thrill of visiting in-the-know restaurants that appreciate the culinary acumen shared by Chaine members.

Other Chaine members chime in with tales of the exceptional treatment they've received during their extensive travels—a straight-from-the-sea fish course whilst vacationing in Hawaii, a hastily arranged private terrace seating in the Bahamas, on-the-fly tasting menus enjoyed in the south of France—after spotting the tell-tale blue plate displayed by Chaine restaurants.

Chaine benefits appear to be just as worthwhile here at home.

During a recent lunch at the Inn at Little Washington, chef Patrick O'Connell welcomed Chaine members into his inner sanctum.

Guests were invited to wander through the kitchen (O'Connell parked himself at the entrance, making sure to shake hands and pose for pictures with every interested party) and explore the award-winning property while staff circulated with bubbling flutes of non-vintage Haton & Fils brut (a stunning sparkler) and ornate nibbles (a miniature risotto ball revealed red wine-charged grains stirred with finely diced mushrooms, while the "world's smallest baked potato" produced a marble-sized spud loaded with craime fraiche, bacon and diced scallions).

A fascinating arrangement of bigeye tuna bolstered by hunks of tart mango, luscious avocado, zesty red pepper flakes, tangy yuzu sorbet and crunchified

shallots took tuna tartare in delicious new directions.

Braised veal cheeks (tender to a fault) and crawfish tails (as fluffy as they were flavorful) arrived anointed in seductive truffler oil (the most luxurious of lubricants).

Bubble tea burst onto the gourmet circuit courtesy of an inky sweet passion fruit and local blueberries elixir punctuated by the always-festive tapioca balls.

"Truffles for lunch. London tomorrow," Farrell teased a buddy during the Inn lunch.

"It's an ugly life," the globe-trotting gourmand shot back. "But somebody's got to live it."

The Members' Dining Room

U.S. Capitol, H-118; 202-225-6300; www.clerk.house.gov/art_history/art_artifacts/Dining_Roomsite/index.htm

Average entree: \$13 to \$20 (\$\$). Open for breakfast and lunch, Monday through Friday.

If the hallowed halls of Congress are indeed home to all those unsavory political analogies—I love the "drunken sailors" bit, think "pork-barrel spending" is culturally irrelevant at this point but largely agree with the disheartening aftereffects of intently observing the law-making process (sausage making is an absolute treat compared to suffering through weeklong budget committee markups)—The Members' Dining Room remains a sanctuary where civility and discretion still reign supreme.

The main dining area is split in two,