

## Marigold Blossoms at Keswick Hall

by Stephanie Ganz

*The latest in Chef Jean-Georges' global collection arrives in style.*



Sera Petras Photography LLC

When a world-renowned hef chooses Keswick (population 4,304) for his latest outpost, it's a coup. But after Keswick Hall's extravagant renovations, the luxury resort makes a fitting home for Marigold, the newest showstopper in Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten's portfolio of 40-some restaurants, scattered across the world in cities like New York, London, and Tokyo.

For Keswick Hall owners, Robert and Molly Hardie, Marigold is their gift to Charlottesville, one that's equally suited for a casual dinner with friends or a special celebration.

With its stunning, panoramic views and seasonal Southern fare elevated by French and Asian influences, Marigold is more than a restaurant, it's an event. Stepping inside, past the outdoor petanque court, I feel instantly transported, as though the day's cares have been checked with my coat. The grand entrance, paneled in rustic wood, gives off a Pacific Coast vibe. Inside, the cathedral-like dining room seats 130 with room for 70 more on the patio, which twinkles with string lights and boasts a massive stone fireplace. But it's the bluetiled bar, buzzing with French bistro energy, that beckons guests to start with a cocktail.

Beverage Director Sean Rouch collaborated with the Jean-Georges team to create a cocktail menu that highlights local, seasonal ingredients, often plucked from the herb garden on the property. Special attention was paid to selecting Virginia and French wines that pair equally well with the dinner menu's plant-based options, of which there is a delightful abundance.

I start with the fennel mezcalita cocktail, which combines a smoky fennel-infused Banhez mezcal with elderflower, tarragon, lemon, and cardamom for a surprising riff on a margarita. On the fruitier side of the drink menu, the raspberry lychee bellini is tart, sweet, and effervescent, with Crémant d'Alsace sparkling wine.



Amy Smith

(Photo by Amy and Jackson Smith)



Chef de Cuisine Luther Dowdy, who worked directly with Vongerichten to execute the menu, is a Virginia outdoorsman who takes an assured approach to familiar Southern ingredients. But you also sense Dowdy's impressive technical skill, honed during his seven years as chef de cuisine at Thomas Keller's Bouchon Bakery in Manhattan.

Raw courses precede appetizers on the dinner menu, so we begin with the ahi tuna tartare. Impeccable ruby tuna is dressed in an aromatic ginger dressing and gilded with paper-thin radishes, arranged like fish scales. Service feels remarkably polished for such a new restaurant, evidenced by the arrival, tableside, of a white country loaf and an olive focaccia, both fluffy and supple. You can tell much about a restaurant by its bread, and this is a good sign.

Asian influences are key to Vongerichten's cuisine, and the crispy sushi dish is textured perfection — silky fish juxtaposed with crunchy fried rice. The sashimi with spicy white ponzu is all about the flavors of tart ponzu and peppery wasabi against the clean yellowfin tuna, hamachi, and Faroe island salmon.

As we move on to the appetizers, we find four precisely seasoned corn and Thai basil potstickers swimming in soy-lime ginger dressing, a standout course. Next, a thin and chewy Neapolitan pizza comes bubbling and freckled with char from the wood-fired oven. Ours was an expression of luxury presented simply: black truffles, mild fontina, a wee salad of dressed frisée on top, and nothing more. The pasta and pizza menu is where seasonality is on full display. In fall and winter, squash, beets, and brussel sprouts from nearby Oakdale Farm take center stage.

Marigold's menu gives equal attention to vegetarian selections. No longer an afterthought for reluctant chefs, the plant-based offerings are some of the finest options on the menu. The roasted cauliflower is caramelized and piquant, with a bright yellow, lemony turmeric tahini sauce through which each bite should be dragged.

For our main course, we decide to revel in the magnificence of the moment, indulging in a whole roasted lobster with shoestring fries, and though the lobster was expertly prepared to bring out a deep, savory flavor, the chip-like fries were less satisfying. Batter-fried chicken feels like a French chef's cheeky nod to the American South, and it's unlike any fried chicken you've tasted — enrobed in a crispy tempura batter and paired with a delicately spiced sauce plus sautéed greens that are the surprising star of the plate.

The dessert course is a study in classics — a warm chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream isn't too far from the molten lava cakes Jean-Georges popularized more than 30 years ago. And it's baked so expertly, it feels altogether new. All the fun is loaded into the salted caramel ice cream sundae, which tops the subtle ice cream with candied peanuts, popcorn, hot fudge, and whipped cream. It's a celebration in a tall glass.

Marigold has been a vision in the minds of the Hardies for years, and its opening comes with a multi-million dollar renovation and reopening of Keswick's hotel, with Vongerichten overseeing the food for the entire operation.

What brought this celebrated international chef to Keswick? Vongerichten was attracted to the gorgeous setting with its access to fresh, seasonal ingredients as well as the opportunity to bring people together. "In Marigold," Vongerichten says, "we wanted to create a social experience where you can share great food with great friends. To me, that is one of the last great experiences in life."



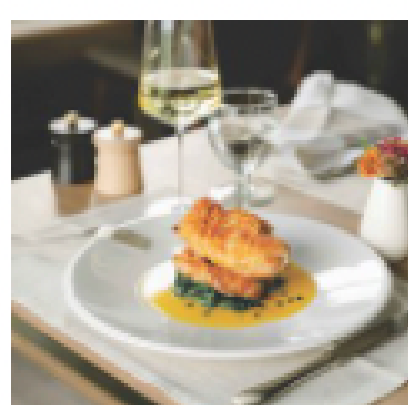
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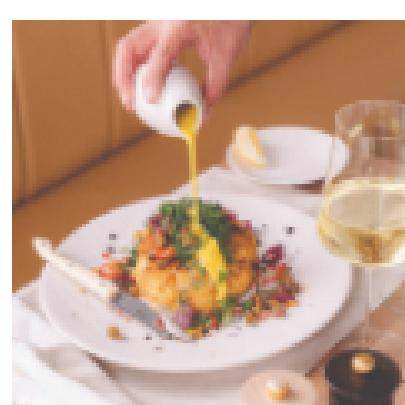
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