



International chef's favorite flavors spice local vittles at Keswick Hall's Marigold

Shanghai, Tokyo, New York, Keswick; if you're known by the company you keep, the Albemarle County community is moving on up, thanks to an internationally renowned chef and the recently opened Marigold Restaurant at Keswick Hall.

The restaurant is situated between the resort's golf course clubhouse and the 109-year-old hotel in the final stages of restoration and features panoramic views of Albemarle County countryside.

"It's a beautiful building and we have a wonderful kitchen, but there's something else exciting here; it's fresh air," said Marigold's creator, Jean-Georges Vongerichten. "I've been living in the city since 1986 and I'm an urban guy. But I'm a country boy at heart and I grew up on a farm. When you get older, you go back a little bit. My heart is in France, my palate is in Asia and my roots are in the country."

If you've never heard of Jean-Georges Vongerichten, you may not be eating right. The French cook with the German last name was born near Strasbourg in Alsace, France, an area that has a long history of sharing German and French culture and cuisine.

Growing up in a mix of cultures may have had an impact on the chef, who goes simply by Jean-Georges. Classically trained in French cuisine, he also trained in Hong Kong, Singapore and Thailand, where he fell in love with the spices and flavors of the East.

He brought the flavors together into his unique style of cooking, using vegetable juices, fruit essences, broths and vinaigrettes instead of meat stocks and creams.

Now he creates recipes and menus and a worldwide dining empire that includes 41 restaurants scattered from the Bahamas to Las Vegas, Jakarta to Morocco. He's the recipe man behind a dozen restaurants in New York City, alone.

From concept, menu and architectural design to staff selection and training, he works to stay involved in the restaurants to keep them timely and on track. That's hasn't been that easy as of late.

"For me, cooking is about expressing flavors from around the world. You get new ideas by talking to people and tasting foods," he said. "We have restaurants in Shanghai and Tokyo and Singapore, but we haven't been able to go anywhere for a year and a half now, so I feel like this, coming to the country, is something new."

For Marigold's menu theme, Jean-Georges chose to feature the region's produce, artisan farms and meats. Using ingredients from the farm of Keswick Hall owners Molly and Robert Hardie and meats from area butchers and livestock grower, the chef decided to create a restaurant with a menu that changes with what's in season.

"Through good food comes a good palate. If you can grow it and raise it, you can make wonderful food," he said. "[The Hardies] have a big farm. They have chickens and raise their own cattle. They have amazing tomatoes on the farm and eggplant, and we picked some zucchini this morning. That local food, that fresh flavor, is what good cooking is about."

One advantage of the Central Virginia location is that the chef believes residents are accepting of his favorite spices.

“Lemon grass, ginger and a bit of heat — I love my chilies — people are very open to flavors here. In ways, it’s even easier here than New York City,” Jean-Georges said. “You’re not afraid of spices here. There are Tex-Mex influences. There’s not a lot of Korean influence here, but there is Thai.”

A few hours from the coast, Keswick offers an excellent location for serving fresh seafood and raw food such as sushi and sashimi, as well as local meats. Most important are the local vegetables and fruits.

One Marigold summer menu item features slices of summer squash and zucchini rolled into a spiral, seasoned with parmesan cheese, salt, pepper and thyme, baked and served with sungold tomatoes.

“We have a lot of vegetables on the menu this summer. About 60% of the items are vegetables because of the season and all the fresh vegetables coming from the farm,” Jean-Georges said. “It’s exciting because in six weeks from now there are going to be peaches and apples, and they even have fig trees. We’ll focus on what’s fresh and what’s local.”

Marigold has been a project several years in the making. When the Hardies decided to renovate Keswick Hall, they wanted to provide dining as fine as the design and décor of the new resort.

The two have a long history and love of the area. Robert Hardie is an alumnus of the University of Virginia and serves as vice rector of the UVa Board of Visitors. Molly Hardie is a Richmond native and a graduate of the UVa School of Medicine and has served on the UVa Health Foundation Board of Trustees, the Virginia Discovery Museum board and the Peabody School board of trustees.

The Hardies knew Jean-Georges from his New York restaurants and talked over their plans with him during dinner conversations.

“I became acquainted with Robert as a customer in my restaurant in New York, and we became friends, and he told me of this project. I came down a couple of years ago to visit the site and I fell in love,” he said.

“When they approached me about the project, I thought I’d like to come South, or at least south of Manhattan. I’m a country boy at heart, but it’s not too far from New York. If I want to go back, it’s just a five-hour drive,” he said.

With the chance to build a new restaurant, the chef designed not just the open floor plan with great vistas, but a two-level kitchen that allows plenty of prep room, refrigeration and cooking space.

Built to blend with the resort, Marigold’s airy milieu features hardwood floors with stone, wood and wrought iron throughout with enough glass to bring in both light and landscape views.

The design creates a casually elegant ambience that somehow feels comfortable and exclusive, urbane and rustic.

With 130 indoor seats, 20 bar seats and 70 outdoor seats, Marigold should provide room for both resort guests and locals to dine. Once the renovations are complete later this summer, the restaurant will open to breakfast and lunch service as well.

“The hotel is from 1912, so it’s a historical place in an historical area. It has a sense of place,” Jean-Georges said. “We’re going to try and fit in and bring something new to the area and the hotel when it opens again.”