

COMMENTARY

The Daily Progress

Established 1892

Reynolds Hutchins, Editor
(202) 999-8601
rhutchins@dailyprogress.com

MANTI AT SMYRNA

Peerless cuisine is worthy of celebration

Whether you've won a national title or just love a ribeye. Smyrna is for you.

It's a good sign for a coach to have a traditional restaurant for celebrating national championships. How many coaches can say: "Each year when we win the national title, I go to _____"? It's also a good sign for the restaurant. How many restaurants host annual championship celebrations?

University of Virginia swimming and diving coach Todd DeSorbo has won five straight women's swimming national championships. And when he wins, he celebrates at Smyrna. "It's become a tradition,"

said DeSorbo. "Maybe even now a superstition."

DeSorbo's choice of Smyrna shows its breadth of appeal, as his taste in food, he says, can run a bit conventional: burgers, steaks and the like. When Smyrna opened, its Aegean-inspired cuisine initially attracted a more discriminating crowd: chefs on their night off. Over time, the restaurant's popularity spread to regular folks and, evidently, national champion coaches. After DeSorbo's latest title, I joined him at Smyrna for his traditional feast.

Smyrna is the product of two Turkey natives who met while working at a Manhattan restaurant. Tarik Sengul, a cook, and Orhun Dikmen, a server, became such good friends that they dreamt of having their own place. After Dikmen moved to Charlottesville to help his brother open Sultan Kebab, he lobbied Sengul to join him and open a restaurant together. In 2022, Sengul finally agreed.

This was a blessing for Charlottesville. Few chefs have arrived with a pedigree like Sengul's, whose French culinary training includes Michelin-starred restaurants, including L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon. Before they opened Smyrna at 707 W. Main St., nowhere in town served what it touts as "eclectic Aegean cuisine." Sengul's food is so distinct that one might call it a new cuisine altogether. Aegean-inspired dishes made by applying classical French techniques to Virginia ingredients. Is anyone doing that anywhere?

If Sengul has created a new cuisine, it is not on purpose. As some say, "fusion is confusion," and Sengul has no grand plan to meld Turkey, France and Virginia. Rather, his food is a product of life experiences, influences and, most importantly, the Virginia land.

"You have to respect the land and present that on your plate," Sengul said. "The land commands your direction as a chef if you are aware and listen."

That direction then guides the chef's expression.

"The artistic part of cooking has to reflect a chef's experiences," said Sengul.

Much like a painting reveals the inspirations and experiences that shaped the artist, Sengul's food naturally manifests his palate's memories of Turkey, his training in New York and his new home in Virginia.

This artistry is what attracts so many chefs, such as Lampo's Loren Mendosa.

"Every time you go, Tarik's entire approach to the food, you can just feel it," Mendosa said. "The way he expresses himself through food is palpable."

But you don't need to be a chef

Table setting

Smyrna

Aegean-inspired restaurant

707 W. Main St.

(434) 956-4250

5 to 9:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday and Monday, closed Tuesday

to enjoy great food. For DeSorbo, the main attraction is steak, the "Ribeye for 2" that anchors his celebration.

It starts with the land. Virginia cattle farmer Rob Harrison, of Foods for Thought, says Sengul is one of his only customers who buys his dry-aged Roseda Black Angus beef as an entire quarter cow. Sengul breaks down the beef in house and shows his respect for it with a 45-minute cooking process: sear in tallow fat made from ribeye rack trim; baste with garlic-butter, rosemary and thyme; roast; rest; and, finally, grill over charcoal. The steak is served with jus made from the beef's bones, pommes dauphine and gem lettuce.

"The best steak in town," said DeSorbo. "Peerless."

In addition to the steak, we enjoyed a soup of curried roast kabocha squash blended into a 20-ingredient vegetable broth, topped with labneh, pepitas and truffle vinaigrette. The soup changes seasonally, and in summer becomes a DeSorbo favorite that I once named Charlottesville's dish of the year: gazpacho of heirloom tomatoes and sour cherry, topped with Fresno chilies and Caromont Farm goat cheese.

Farmer's Bread is another DeSorbo go-to. "It's unbelievable, and you can't stop wanting to eat it," he said of the yeasty bread Sengul bakes daily from Virginia's own Deep Roots Mill flour. It's Sengul's favorite item on the menu. "Bread is sacred to me," said Sengul. "The bread is a way for me to tie in flavors that shaped my palate as a child in Turkey, with techniques I learned while working in New York while using the superior quality of ingredients provided by the land here in Virginia."

Other standouts are the meze trio of dips, lamb kebab and, Mendosa's favorite, "manti" dumplings. Marble-size, hand-pinched pasta purses hold Sharrondale Farm mushrooms, with pepper butter sauce, garlic yogurt and dehydrated tomato. "Elevated comfort food," said Mendosa.

It takes more than great food to make a great restaurant, and what keeps Smyrna full every night is how they make guests feel.

"It's almost like walking into a home and being welcomed with open arms and being taken care of while you're there," said DeSorbo.

Like DeSorbo, I celebrate special occasions there, too.

Speaking of special, no school has won six consecutive women's swimming national championships. After our meal I asked DeSorbo how he would celebrate if Virginia were to become the first. "Steak at Smyrna," he said. "100%."

Simon Davidson is founder of the Charlottesville 29 food website. He has written about Charlottesville food for more than a decade. He lives in Keswick with his wife and two children.

PERSEVERANDO

A little word from yesterday

What we can learn from Virginia's original, lesser-known state motto

Tim Kaine, Virginia's Minnesota-born, Kansas-raised junior U.S. senator, rarely passes on an opportunity to share his adoptive state's story with others. That's because the Democrat believes that there are lessons for the nation — good and bad — that spring from the state where it was born.

In a speech at the Virginia Museum of History and Culture and in an op-ed in the Richmond Times-Dispatch, both pegged to the fast-approaching 250th anniversary of American independence,

Kaine focused on Virginia's motto, one as old as the republic: "Sic semper tyrannis" — Latin for "Thus always to tyrants" or "Ever thus to tyrants." Kaine implied that its spirit

should guide public and political resistance to President Donald Trump.

Kaine, of course, has a front-row seat to the mayhem that supposedly qualifies as governance. And the increasingly edgy, occasionally profane manner with which Kaine characterizes Trump, his utterances and behavior suggest that the usually circumspect senator is unburdened by political considerations — that he is free to fully speak his mind because this third term in Washington is likely his last.

But here's arguing that Virginia's other motto has greater application to our troubled times than "Sic semper tyrannis," a rhetorical flourish attributed to Brutus as he and others plotted the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. and reportedly howled by John Wilkes Booth as he shot dead President Abraham Lincoln in 1865.

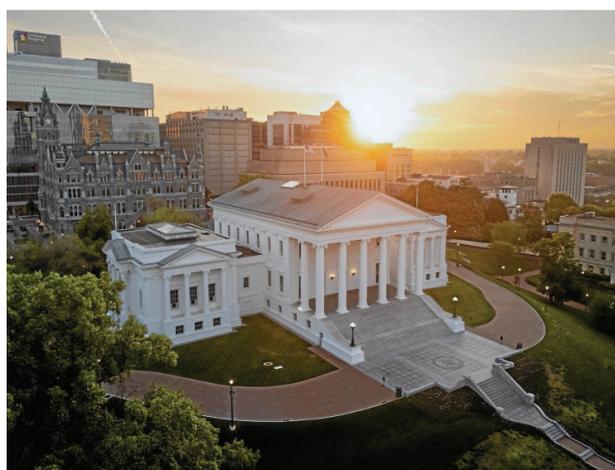
In 1779, as the war for freedom from Great Britain raged on, the Virginia legislature adopted as the state's secondary motto "Perseverando" — Latin, for "By persevering." More than 200 years on — as Trump perfects his I-am-the-law schtick by ignoring Congress and defying the courts — one would admit that "Perseverando" nicely complements "Sic semper tyrannis." After all, toppling tyrants demands perseverance.

Virginians know that tyranny can take many forms — and that it is often defined by the times and those literally or figuratively shackled.

It was the tax-imposing British monarchy in the late 1700s that embodied tyranny. To White Confederates, it was the North that opposed Black slavery in the South in the mid-1800s. For the once enslaved and their descendants, it was the White oligarchy that denied Black Virginians voting and civil rights for nearly a century, beginning in the late 1800s. For LGBTQ+ people in the 2000s, it is the conservative politicians who used their control of government to deny them rights guaranteed for straight folks.

Indeed, "Perseverando" — it appears on the reverse of the seal, paired with likenesses of three classical goddesses representing liberty, eternity and agriculture — works much better than the original secondary motto, also in Latin, that it replaced, "Deus nobis haec otia fecit" — "God has given us these days of leisure." By the way, it's the motto of Liverpool, England, a major slaving port in the 18th century and where the Beatles got their start in the 20th.

That motto's sentiment seems far removed from the noble, grinding, sometimes-bloody enterprise that is the struggle for — and to preserve — freedom. The jettisoned motto — it was done away with three years after it was adopted — could conjure an image of Hawaiian shirt-wearing sybarites stretched out on beach chairs



MIKE KROPF, TIMES-DISPATCH

In 1779, as the war for freedom from Great Britain raged on, the Virginia legislature adopted as the state's secondary motto "Perseverando" — Latin, for "By persevering."

along the edge of a noisy, smoke-shrouded battlefield, sipping tropical drinks and taking in the combat as if it were a surfing competition.

Not even Thomas Jefferson liked it.

In a July 30, 1776, letter to John Page, a future congressman and Virginia governor from Gloucester County whom Jefferson would defeat in his first try for that office, the Muck-a-muck of Monticello — busy at the time in Philadelphia helping birth the new republic — reported that most people in and around the Pennsylvania State House, now known as Independence Hall, considered the motto a head-scratcher. Jefferson was delighted, though, with "Sic semper Tyrannis."

It, along with the secondary motto, was the handiwork of a committee of heavyweights: George Mason, George Wythe, Richard Henry Lee and Robert Carter Nicholas. The foursome also designed Virginia's seal, the primary feature of which is the bare-breasted Virtus — avert your eyes Ken Cuccinelli! — a drawn sword in her right hand, a spear in her left and her foot atop the toppled tyrant, whose crown has fallen from his head. The whole package was adopted by the Virginia Convention of 1776.

"I like the device of the first side of the seal much," wrote Jefferson, a detail-oriented aesthete from Albemarle County. "The second I think is you much crouded, nor is the design so striking. But for god's sake what is the 'deus nobis haec otia fecit.' It puzzles every body here. This device is to aenigmatical, since if it puzzles now, it will absolutely insoluble fifty years hence!"

Thanks to the Library of Virginia — especially to Becky Schneider, the interim archives and reference services manager and the state's chief librarian, Dennis Clark — the story behind those little words that appear on the state seal is a lot bigger. And while the seals and the accompanying mottoes might seem arty affectations of eras long passed, they remain to this day emblems of the authority extended to officialdom by those who installed them: the people.

In 1777, with the seal, itself, being prepared by a Philadelphia engraver "at public charge," according to 18th-century records, a Virginia representative to France — he was seeking arms and cash for the colonial cause — had "no seal to authenticate his credentials, and the delay in obtaining the seal ordered in Philadelphia was the source of considerable annoyance," wrote state librarian H.R. McIlwaine in a 1909-10 report on possible modifications to the seal.

By law, there are two seals — the great and the lesser. They are distinguished by size, with the former, 2 3/4 inches in diameter, about twice as large as the latter. The great seal is reserved for validating documents signed by the governor and used in legal proceedings or Virginia's dealings with other states. The lesser seal

is affixed to grants for land, writs ordering elections, gubernatorial pardons and reprieves as well as commissions and appointments — civil and military.

The keeper of the seal is the secretary of the commonwealth, a political appointee of the governor who dispenses patronage jobs and — perhaps prized even more than a seat on high-profile board or commission — those two- and three-digit license plates that are supposed to telegraph to fellow motorists that the driver who may have whizzed by, well over the speed limit, has an influential friend in Richmond.

At a time when politics and policy are shaped by bitter wars of will rather than thoughtful, interested debate, the relevance of Virginia's mottoes endure. That said, "Sic semper tyrannis" is prospective in tone, aspirational. "Perseverando" speaks to the struggle and the vigilance that should continue even after a tyrant is toppled, to discourage and thwart those who might rise in his or her stead.

In the years immediately following the Civil War, when Virginia was restored to the union, largely under the supervision of federal troops, its Reconstruction governor was viewed as taking a somewhat tyrannical approach to altering the seal. Francis Pierpont wanted to add the words, "Liberty and union." Though the changes were sanctioned by the legislature in 1866, there were doubts whether it was done legally. Within a decade, the additional words were removed.

But because, in a Virginia given to Shintoism, the old is venerated, there was a push in the early 1900s to drop "Perseverando," replacing it with the original secondary motto. A report to the Library Board, observing that the seal was "lacking ... in artistic grace and beauty," suggested that its historical symmetry could be restored by reviving "Deus nobis haec otia fecit," then translated as, "God has given us this ease."

The effort was turned back — if only because of "Perseverando."

And speaking of: For those of us in print journalism, particularly in these times, it seems one often gets through the day by persevering. I did — happily — at the Times-Dispatch, for 39 years, four months and 29 days.

This is my final column for the newspaper. I'll be keeping an eye on Virginia politics as a part-time analyst for Radio IQ, the Roanoke-based, statewide public broadcasting outfit. You can reach me via jeschapiro@gmail.com.

Thank you for putting up with me — and for keeping me in touch.

Perseverando.

Jeff Schapiro is a columnist for the Times-Dispatch in Richmond, where he has lived since 1979. He covered politics and policy out of United Press International's news bureau in the capital before joining the Times-Dispatch in 1987.