

DINNER WITH SIMON

# Ivy Inn, still radiant after all these years

A restaurant owned by the same people for 30 years can't still be any good, right? It must be resting on its laurels, the spark gone.

Ivy Inn proves that wrong. Since 1995, chef Angelo Vangelopoulos and his wife, Farrell, have kept Ivy Inn Charlottesville's favorite special occasion restaurant. Among the many celebratory meals I have enjoyed there, the most recent may have been the best. But how?

The occasion was another 30-year milestone: Gerry Newman's three decades running the iconic Albemarle Baking Company. He joined me to celebrate.

Ham biscuits were once named Charlottesville's signature dish, and our meal began with Vangelopoulos' version: slices of Kite's Ham on miniature buttery biscuits, paired with tomato and red pepper soup. From that local beginning, the meal took a culinary tour of Vangelopoulos' life and inspirations. In less capable hands, such a varied menu might falter. But, a Culinary Institute of America graduate, two-time James Beard Award semifinalist and entry on the Mount Rushmore of Charlottesville chefs, Vangelopoulos excels at cuisines beyond the new American backbone of his menu.

Ceviche at Rick Bayless' legendary Chicago Mexican restaurant Frontera Grill, for example, impressed Vangelopoulos so much that he recreated it. Along with the common citrus marinade, our scallop ceviche had slices of green olive and sundried tomato for unctuousness and texture, said Vangelopoulos.

A Japanese-inspired yellowfin tuna tartare followed, a nod to sous chef Emma Mahone's love of raw tuna. Diced tuna on seaweed salad was topped with miniature rice cakes, radish



SIMON DAVIDSON

Gerry Newman, left, and Angelo Vangelopoulos, right, are both celebrating 30th anniversaries this year: Newman at Albemarle Baking Company and Vangelopoulos at Ivy Inn.

slivers, cilantro and streaks of golden ginger aioli and crimson spicy mayo. The mosaic of colors and textures dazzled first our eyes, then our mouths. "Good gracious," Newman exclaimed midbite.

Next came a return to Virginia in a crispy pork belly dish that is an Ivy Inn signature, and Newman's favorite of the night. Double H Farm pork belly gets the royal treatment: a weeklong brine of salt, sugar, spices and apple cider vinegar, then seared, slow-roasted, chilled and fried to order. Ours came over grits and collard greens, topped with a fried quail egg, with punches of hot sauce vinaigrette to offset the richness. "A delicious forkful," Newman gushed.

Eggplant earned double billing in an Italian American eggplant "parm" ravioli inspired by Vangelopoulos' second home growing up: his father's pizza shop. First, it joined ricotta inside the handmade ravioli. Second, slices were breaded, fried and tucked

under the ravioli with burrata, fresh tomato sauce and basil oil. "A nice hidden treat," Newman said of the crispy eggplant beneath the tender pasta.

By this point, we were marveling that food of such high quality could emerge from a kitchen run by the same chef for 30 years. That's also true of the bread and pastries from Newman's bakery.

So how do they do it? Never losing sight of their purpose: caring for the customer. "Someone is coming in and spending their money, and they deserve to be treated with kindness and respect and a quality product," Newman said. That care is why Newman wakes every day at 2 a.m. and why every detail matters to him as much today as on Day One.

Vangelopoulos agrees. His mentors cooked in an era before the Food Network, celebrity chefs and brand-building. Their sole focus was their restaurant and, by extension, their customers. That "singularity," as Van-



IVY INN

Ivy Inn has one of Charlottesville's last remaining white-tablecloth dining rooms. Its food also meets a higher standard.

### Table setting

#### Ivy Inn

American

2244 Old Ivy Road

(434) 977-1222

5 to 9 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday

affect the final result.

And it's not just the food. Thirty years on, the same attention appears in every aspect of Ivy Inn's hospitality, which Angelo and Farrell describe as "old school." In an 1815 house, their restaurant remains one of Charlottesville's only white-tablecloth settings with dim lighting and hushed tones. All the better to appreciate Vangelopoulos' food.

We finished with a trio of chocolate desserts, each with its own inspiration, like a mousse-filled profiterole with a twist he learned from fellow Mount Rushmore chef Vincent Derquenne at a 2014 dinner honoring their induction. Before baking, he tops each profiterole with a disc of butter, flour and sugar, which melts as it bakes to form a crunchy exterior. Even award-winning pastry chef Newman heaped praise: "He's hitting on all cylinders tonight, don't you think?"

Yes, the spark is not gone. It's bright as ever.

Simon Davidson is a restaurant critic for The Daily Progress. He also 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.



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