

A full-page photograph of a chef, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, smiling broadly in a professional kitchen. He is wearing a white chef's coat. In the background, other kitchen staff and equipment are visible but out of focus.

wonderful
DINING

RE-INN-VENTED

*Jean-Georges
turns historic
into timeless*

By ANDREA KENNEDY

Jean-Georges Vongerichten
at The Inn at Pound Ridge.
Photograph by Andrea Kennedy.

It's day two of Jean-Georges Vongerichten's latest dining destination, The Inn at Pound Ridge. He takes a seat with me in his chic country lounge and gazes at the setting sun.

"Look at the colors," he says. "Incredible."

Around him, a team of whirling dervishes hustles to reply to press, accommodate an influx of coveted reservations and celeb guests and prepare for their clockwork service. Considering his empire of dining destinations, he's seasoned at very grand openings. But this January day the self-proclaimed "country boy" seems particularly at ease. Though Jean-Georges never anticipated opening a restaurant so close to his Waccabuc retreat, the fact that his work followed him means it also adopted the locale's laid-back quality.

"When you're in the country, it's different," he says. "It's our second night. Do I look stressed?"

He doesn't. His smiling eyes gleam with passion and pride. They dart around the room as he storytells of the landmark he revived.

"A place like this, you have to be excited about it," he says. "It's a piece of history."

FLOOR TO CEILING FACELIFT

Opened mid-January with fanfare from The Times to Page Six, The Inn by Jean-Georges and partner Phil Suarez emanates rustic warmth with all the trappings of a coveted and cosmopolitan cabin in the woods. Pulling up to the fully restored residence dating back to 1883, you may just feel like you're arriving at your country dream home complete with pristine white picket fence. An ascending staircase greets you inside the front door along with a feeling of abundant warmth in light and temperature – like they've been expecting you, like you may just hang your bag on the newel post. More than a restaurant, it's a retreat.

"For me a restaurant has to be a place you're going to spend three hours, four hours," says Jean-Georges. "You stay and visit. Relax."

Creating The Inn in its present state was a renovation as well as a reinvention that proved a magnanimous two-year undertaking not only to revive a once-beloved local watering hole (that in a past life was called Emily Shaw's Inn) but also to celebrate its historic features. Under the direction of designer Thomas Juul-Hansen and Jean-Georges himself, the team preserved and restored the original stonework and added custom fretwork panels as room dividers that lend modern interest. Beyond repairs and upgrades, they also preserved the original floors. To add ground insulation they had to lift – and replace – each panel.

"It was like putting back the Louvre in Paris, stone by stone," says Jean-Georges. "People had no idea what a project it was."

SETTING THE COUNTRY TABLE

Though a quaint white façade with green trim lures the eye from the roadside, The Inn is a massive chalet with two levels of dining and a long bar on each. The main dining room upstairs features cathedral ceilings that, like the others, are reclaimed wood. Tables, also wood,



Top, Baeckeoffe, a Jean-Georges favorite. Bottom, A salted caramel sundae. Photographs by Francesco Tonelli.

mingle with mid-century-style seating in khaki leather and earthy upholstery. Simple, extra-soft napkins rest on unfussy paper placemats, and small bud vases spring fresh sprigs. White porcelain tableware by Taiwan-based designer 3,co – a nuanced nod to his love of the East and conveniently available at ABC Carpet & Home – looks one-of-a-kind, each with distinct ridges and ripples like fresh from the potter's wheel.

Flatware is "real silver," says Jean-Georges and "nobody eats with the same knife and fork." Bread plates are also mismatched, hand-selected vintage porcelain with floral patterns – my favorite featured poppies – and painted with gold rims.

"They're all antiques," the chef adds, and the sense that they're from a country sophisticate's collection absolutely charms.

Illuminating the dining landscape is, one might say, the Jean-Georges of lighting design, Hervé Descottes.

"I'm a lighting fanatic. ...I won't do a restaurant if he doesn't do the lighting," says Jean-Georges. "Everybody has to look good. Everyone has to have a glow."

I counted three fireplaces and a handful of comfy-cozy gathering nooks adorned with fresh flowers and candlelight. Candles, in fact, are the sole illumination in one secluded cavern that contains a regally long dining table with tall candelabras. A glass panel offers guests a view of the wine cellar that includes beverage director Bernard Sun's selections like a Benziger Tribute Cabernet Sauvignon from Napa, Domaine Weinbach Reserve Personnelle Gewurztraminer from the chef's native Alsace and NV Billecart-Salmon Brut Champagne.

MENU ALL-STARS

I ordered a ginger-spiced Big Apple martini on my visit, just one of The Inn's offerings that's also served at his restaurants in Manhattan.

"I tried to bring a few dishes from restaurants in the city," Jean-Georges says. "I call this 'the best of.'"

My husband and I relished our foie gras terrine masterpiece with dried sour cherries, candied pistachios and a circling of delicate white port gelée. The rich foie, served at the three-Michelin star winner Jean-Georges, complemented our light yet flavorful shredded kale salad with Serrano chilies and mint, an app from ABC Kitchen. We savored, too, the peekytoe crab crostini with dill and garlic aioli that's reminiscent of a selection at his Mercato in Shanghai.

"You can come to the bar here and have a nice burger, and we have a truffle pizza that is really nice," says the chef. "I want to have a little bit of comfort food, familiar food, with little touches to make it different."

A favorite of those little touches – chilies.

"I put chilies on everything," he laughs. "I'm bringing chilies to the country."

Our grilled lamb main wowed in a smoked chili glaze prepared at the perfect heat from the chilies and from the grill. Kitchen kudos go to chef de cuisine Blake Farrar, formerly of The Mark, who Jean-Georges calls "a rock star." You can see him and the rest of the talented team in action from the chef's table inside the kitchen.

Other not-to-miss items come from The Inn's pastry chef Melody Farrar, who most recently was posted at ABC Kitchen and is the other half of the Farrar culinary power couple. She brought the house-made salted caramel ice cream that's presented sundae-style over candied popcorn and peanuts. Also try Melody's (what I call) "designer" doughnuts – airy, four-bite favorites that hold their shape beautifully and highlight flavor-packed glazes like lemon or chocolate with cocoa nibs that dazzle the taste buds and delight the inner 5-year-old.

Another item that taps into childhood – Jean-Georges' this time – is one of The Inn's savory specials inspired from the chef's youth in the French countryside.

"I put something for my mom on the menu," he says. "It's a lamb shank cooked in a handmade clay pot made in Alsace, which I shipped over. Potato, white wine, carrots, onions – it's very rustic. It's called baeckeoffe. I grew up with that dish once a week in the wintertime."

A (FAMOUS) FARM-TO-TABLE

Entering spring, Jean-Georges says The Inn will feature about 95 percent local farm-to-table fare. His enthusiasm unwaning, he bursts, "It's amazing" every time it strikes him how close the kitchen is to suppliers "just up the road."

"Martha, of course, is dropping off eggs," he adds, as in Stewart, his Bedford neighbor.

Frequent patrons will likely spot low-profile A-listers and Jean-Georges, of course, particularly on weekends when he's not paddle-boating on his pond or perusing local farmers markets. If you see him this month, wish him a happy birthday – but only if you can catch him. The man is rarely still, whizzing between the back and front of house with the energy, he admits, "of a 12-year-old." You could say he brings the pace of the city to the country. I say it's the effervescence of a man in his element. ■