

RI FOOD & DINING

Is Jamestown the new dining destination in Rhode Island?

More than half a dozen new restaurants have opened in this tiny Conanicut Island town over the past 18 months

By **Andrea McHugh** Globe Correspondent, Updated November 30, 2022, 6:00 a.m.



A dish from Our Table in Jamestown, Rhode Island. OUR TABLE

JAMESTOWN, R.I. — When chefs Marla Romash and Marc Alexander visited friends in Jamestown in December 2014, they didn't know they'd be walking into a scene straight

out of a Christmas movie, as they describe it. It was the annual Holiday Stroll, and the two watched as Santa and Mrs. Claus arrived on the island by boat, the local women's club passed out hot chocolate, and townsfolk gathered around the tree at East Ferry to watch its lighting.

“It was quite the scene, and we fell in love. That was it. We were done,” concedes Romash, and so began the couple's quest to bring their culinary talents to Conanicut Island. They had to wait until this past spring to make that dream happen, and it turns out, they were hardly the only aspirational restaurateurs lured by Jamestown's charms.

More than half a dozen new restaurants have opened in Jamestown over the past 18 months, in addition to new owners taking over the [Village Hearth Bakery & Cafe](#), an island institution for two decades. “A renaissance,” is how Jamestown native and seasoned restaurateur Kevin Gaudreau describes it.



Stephanie and Lindsay Haigh left high-powered careers in Atlanta to purchase Village Hearth Bakery & Café in Jamestown. HANDOUT

“When I was a kid, it was a total blue-collar community,” he said. Gaudreau was cooking in New York City when he and his wife decided they wanted to return to Conanicut Island to raise a family. He led the kitchen at the now-closed Trattoria Simpatico for five years. He tried to buy the iconic eatery more than once, but moved on to other Rhode Island restaurants when a deal never materialized.

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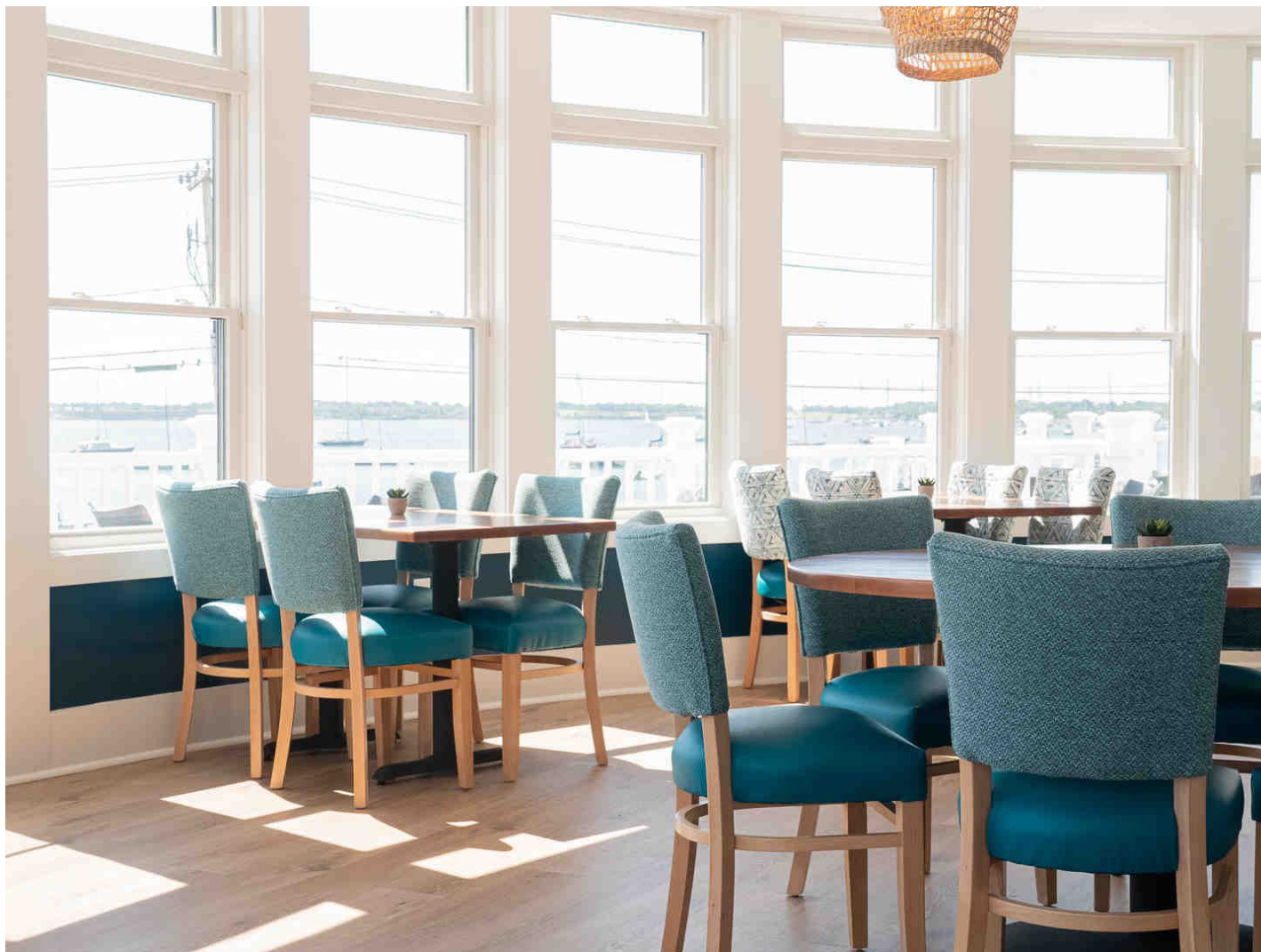
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“About a year and a half ago, a group of Jamestowners approached me and asked me if I wanted to come in as a partner, buy some equity in the place, and be the operator,” he explained. “[Beech](#),” a 238-seat restaurant named for the massive 150-year-old American Copper Beech tree that canopies much of the outdoor dining space, opened in July of this year. (“Ruth,” as the tree is dubbed, is named after Ruth Bader Ginsburg and is as carefully maintained as the restaurant itself.)

“It was a long time coming,” said Gaudeau, who describes Jamestown’s dining scene after the 2008 financial crisis a “food desert.”



JB's on the Water is a restaurant in Jamestown overlooking Narragansett Bay and the Newport Bridge. HANDOUT

“Demographically, the island has changed a little bit, obviously. COVID was probably a piece of that. We’ve had a lot of these seasonal residents who decided to spend their winters here instead of having to go back to New York or Philly or Washington,” said Gaudeau. “Everyone was working from home anyway, so we have seen people transition into more of a full-time resident this year, and I think that’s what’s really helped all these local businesses.”

For Romash and Alexander, the pandemic provided an opportunity to test the market as they patiently waited for the right restaurant space to become available. They started a weekly dinner delivery business in Jamestown during the pandemic that also served as a research project.

“It became an incubator to find out what people on the island here really want and like,” said Alexander. The couple was introduced to a local developer who bought a building that had been a family-run pharmacy on Narragansett Avenue to create “[Our Table](#),” a warm, elevated comfort food restaurant which opened in May. Today, grilled blackened tuna on buttered grits, braised beef short ribs, and fried chicken and biscuits topped with maple bourbon butter, honey mustard and a barbecue glaze are just some of the dishes driving mid-week reservations — even this time of year, on an island with a population of just 5,536 full-time residents.



Executive chef Marc Alexander, left, and pastry chef Marla Romash, right, are the owners of Our Table in Jamestown. OUR TABLE

“We started out very much wanting to create a neighborhood spot; a place for Jamestowners,” explained Romash, though she’s been excited to see a swell of diners from Newport, East Greenwich and beyond. “We live here, we are part of this

community, we are committed to this community, and I love when I look around the restaurant and know that 90 percent of our seats are filled by our neighbors.”

Evan Smith, a Jamestown resident for more than 25 years (“that makes me a carpetbagger,” he said with a chuckle) who serves as CEO and president of [Discover Newport](#), the region’s visitors bureau, said local support is critical to the sustainability of a restaurant here.

“There’s this feeling, and this is more of me speaking as a resident right now, you’re saying to yourself, ‘Do I feel like going off island tonight?’ Honestly, it’s an island thing,” explains Smith. He points to [JB’s on the Water](#), which opened this past summer in the location many residents knew as The Bay Voyage. Its new owner, John Brito opened [Wickford on the Water](#) in North Kingstown in 2019, and when he learned of the Jamestown vacancy — and view — he pounced.

“I didn’t even know that place existed,” said Brito. “I didn’t know there were views left for restaurants like this in Rhode Island.” Seeing an opportunity to bring a business casual restaurant with a comfortable, nautical vibe on Narragansett Bay, Brito invested in an extensive renovation.

“We’re trying to cover all the bases that fit the town. That’s what it’s all about; getting the community involved, being a part of it,” said Brito, who is committed to keeping JB’s open seven days a week.



A dish from Our Table in Jamestown. OUR TABLE

But Smith says capitalizing on the Wickford restaurant’s existing audience allows JB’s to connect “at both levels.”

“Both with islanders and with people on the west shore; North and South Kingstown, Narragansett, East Greenwich. They’re bringing a whole new audience to Jamestown.”

Jake Rojas had already earned brand recognition and a loyal following when he opened [Tallulah’s Taqueria](#) in Jamestown in May 2021. He operated a tiny seasonal shack steps from Dutch Harbor’s shoreline along the West Passage of Conanicut Island from 2013 to 2019, where he served tacos, burritos and burrito bowls. When 35 Narragansett Ave. became available, he jumped at the chance to have a brick and mortar location. “We thought it could be really cool to have a restaurant in our hometown,” said Rojas.





Our Table in Jamestown opened earlier this year. ALICIA LAIRD

The grab-and-go eatery offers lunch and dinner Friday through Sunday. Rojas plans to stay open through the second weekend of December, later than last year, and will reopen in March. Affordable, consistent and convenient high-quality sourced food is Rojas's niche.

“Where people can feed their family for \$20 or \$30 bucks, or you can have [a meal] for yourself for \$12 or \$15 bucks, and it’s kind of hard to do that right now,” said Rojas.

Top quality has also been a priority for Stephanie and Lindsay Haigh, who both left high-powered careers in Atlanta to continue the legacy of Jamestown’s beloved Village Hearth Bakery & Cafe. The couple began their search for a restaurant in Provincetown, Mass., never even considering Rhode Island until a real estate agent brought the Village Hearth to their attention.

As it was mid-COVID, decisions were made quickly. Soon, the two were renovating the neighborhood bakery with an enviable reputation. When the Haighs opened in March 2021, they didn’t know a soul on the island. That quickly changed. “Our second week we were open, [a neighbor] stuck her head in the window and said, ‘I live around the corner. My name is Kim and we’re going to be best friends.’” Sure enough, she was right.

“Jamestown welcomed us with open arms,” said Lindsay Haigh. “It couldn’t be a better place or a better fit for us to be. The community showed up for us in every way.”

While they’ve remained true to the integrity of the bakery cafe, they’ve also made changes, expanding the breakfast and lunch menu and adding gluten-free pastries, breads, soups and some vegan dishes. As many of their offerings sell out, it’s clear they’ve made an impression.

“I can say this is where we are going to live forever,” said Stephanie Haigh. “It’s a very special place with very special people.”

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