

Wreaths for the Chicken Coop

Inn at Little Washington's Patrick O'Connell dresses his home for the holidays

By JULIET CHUNG

December 18, 2009 Washington, Va.

In Patrick O'Connell's world, even the chicken coop gets a chandelier. "Hello, lovelies," he called out to his 14 Rhode Island Reds, milling about their 150-square-foot coop decorated with leaded glass windows, a cupola and full-sized Christmas wreaths.

In this town of 200 people, the tall, rangy chef owns The Inn at Little Washington, a restaurant and boutique hotel that's known for its elaborate, country manor-style decor as well as its multicourse meals. The motto from British designer Joyce Evans, with whom Mr. O'Connell often collaborates: "Never use one William Morris print in a room when five will do."



Erik Johnson for The Wall Street Journal

That philosophy also applies to Mr. O'Connell's new home, which represents something of a fresh start. A few years ago, he moved out of the two-bedroom house he had shared with Reinhardt Lynch, his former partner and The Inn's co-founder. In 2006, he purchased a run-down turreted Victorian home a half-block away. Since then the home has been in a near-constant state of flux, as Mr. O'Connell tries to renovate during his limited free time.

"It's a bit of an addiction," said Mr. O'Connell, who has made a habit of moving into a building, renovating it and then turning it into guest space for the Inn.

During a recent holiday party, the 63-year-old Mr. O'Connell, dressed in white pants, Converse sneakers and a jacket assembled from a wool fabric in various patterns, pointed out the gravel driveway he'd created and doorways he had made taller and wider. In the living room, a dark green William Morris print of leaves and hanging fruit covers the ceiling; the drapes feature the same print on an ivory background. For the holidays, a live, nearly 10-foot-tall Christmas tree spray-painted gold and accessorized with gifts wrapped in gold paper stands in the center of the sitting room, and poinsettias and pomegranates dress the

entryway. "It's a completely new house," said Jay Brown, a local bed-and-breakfast owner who said he passed on buying the home for his venture because it needed too much work.

Mr. O'Connell said he plans eventually to create a grand entryway with a staircase to re-orient the home, demolishing the sitting room and bedroom. "I just listen to the house and it says, 'More, more,'" he said.

Mr. O'Connell's home is subdued compared to the Inn about a half-block away, whose décor includes hand-painted Fortuny silk lamp shades, swagged drapery and nearly 400-year-old wooden floors from a French chateau. The least expensive room for two on Christmas night costs \$655 a night; the \$178 Christmas-dinner menu options include a "lump of coal," or chilled foie gras rolled in black truffles with Sauternes jelly, and a rib of beef with truffled yorkshire pudding. (Dinners usually start at \$148.) Mr. O'Connell has a third cookbook in the works, has assumed a seat on the town's council and plans to further renovate and add to the Inn.

As a child growing up outside Washington D.C., Mr. O'Connell grew up painting sets of chairs and repapering bathroom walls. In 1978, he and Mr. Lynch first opened the restaurant, which went on to win glowing reviews and several James Beard awards. Alan Greenspan and Andrea Mitchell married there in 1997, and diners have included Al and Tipper Gore and Laura Bush.

About a decade ago, Mr. O'Connell bought nearly 25 acres of meadow with views of the Blue Ridge Mountains adjacent to the home he now owns, planning to eventually create an agricultural campus with orchards and livestock for the Inn. When the house came on the market a few years ago, he jumped to protect the view, paying about \$650,000 for the 2,800-square-foot home, which sits on more than an acre. Land in this small town commands a premium since not much of it is for sale, local realtors say. The Rabbit Gum, a schoolhouse converted into a residential home on a half-acre close to Mr. O'Connell's home, is listed for \$349,000.

Mr. O'Connell, who says he prefers items with history behind them, has decorated the home almost entirely from leftovers, mixing furniture and accessories left over from Inn renovations with architectural prints and other finds salvaged from local thrift stores. He says he's not sure how much he's spent so far redoing the house.

Recently, Mr. O'Connell laid out a spread that included Petrossian caviar, Veuve Clicquot and a half-round of French cow's milk cheese that harbored a layer of black truffles marinated in Madeira. Mayor Eugene Leggett, wearing a black top hat, arrived with his wife, a signal of how once-tense relations between the Inn, which generated controversy with an expansion plan in the 1990s, and locals have improved in recent years.

Eventually, Mr. O'Connell said he will turn the home into a guest and event space for The Inn and look for his next renovation project.

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