

EAT LIKE A MAN

FEBRUARY 6 - 13, 2014



ask eat like a man

Found: The Incredible Restaurant in The Middle of Nowhere That Nobody Knows About

BY JOSH OZERSKY

A few absurd but durable fantasies haunt the minds of food writers: chubby-chasing lingerie models, infinite expense accounts, zero-calorie cream sauces, and so on. As with so many fantasies, these become more alluring as they become more plausible, and one that always seems *just* out of reach is The Incredible Restaurant That Nobody Knows About. And if this restaurant can be In The Middle of Nowhere, better still.

Well, I have found that restaurant.

It is called The Shack, and it opened in late January in Staunton, Virginia, a picturesque hamlet in the central part

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of the state. It's not really a shack, but rather a small square building about the size of a one-car garage. The name is an allusion to chef Ian Boden's mother-in-law, who actually did live in a shack, a picture of which hangs inside. The restaurant, like the town, is tiny and remote, and the food is absolutely brilliant. The food I had there was the best I'd eaten all winter, and what's more, it was the most interesting I'd eaten all winter.

The place was apparently conceived as a burger hut—there are four on the menu, none of them exceptional. But the burgers are merely a misdirection, a kind of radar deflector. The action here is in the short but spectacular tasting menu, which is generally three or four courses at most, and the steal of the century at sixty dollars.

I started off with a bowl of bright green butter lettuce soup as intense as a quasar. There was a little poached quail egg at the bottom of it, and a crisp slice of buttery garlic toast—basically a micron-thin wafer of crunch and



The taste of this butter lettuce soup was as bright as the color, and that toast wasn't just along for the ride. I literally could have eaten a quart of this.

SWIPE TO VIEW MORE



butter. Next up was a bowl of meat and mushrooms. That's what it looked like, anyway. It was no beauty, I'll be honest. I can describe it best as looking beige and creamy. But my God, what opulence! The sweetest and cleanest sweetbreads you can imagine, cut to the perfect Mentos-like size, and pea-tender gnocchi, with the umami bass turned up via Edwards ham and dirt-fresh yellow-foot chanterelles. The sweet and fragrant cream sauce was

expertly cut by some kind of acid flavor I couldn't place. ("Just the regular French's yellow mustard," Boden told me afterward.) There was also a roasted cauliflower dish of such color and brightness and heft that it was hard to believe it was made of vegetables, such was my enjoyment of the thing. And the buttermilk pudding with thyme, and brown butter apples, and crispy apple skins, and finger limes—the so-called "citrus caviar" that I always used to

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make fun of? Also outrageous. The only thing I didn't like was a peanut crumble of some kind that was dry and basically tasteless. It was there to add texture, I guess.

Now, all this greatness (and these low, low prices) comes with a catch: You have to get there. And if you do, you might have to wait. The Shack has only sixteen seats, and the doll-sized kitchen is barely big enough to feed that many. (Of the restaurant's four hundred square feet, just a hundred and thirty are taken up by the kitchen.) Even if all they really did was make burgers, it still wouldn't be big enough. But of course, they are butchering lambs and pigs back there, extruding their own pasta, running two separate immersion circulators, and juggling food in and out of a refrigerator filled with speed racks ("I keep it in the hallway near the bathroom," Boden told me).

Boden, thirty-five, is skinny and earnest, with a bristly red beard; he looks something like a rising-star rabbi. His credentials as a

chef are impeccable: He was apprenticed at thirteen to the late Marc Fusilier, an old-school French chef, and later worked under Bill Telepan at New York's Judson Grill before taking over Home in Greenwich Village (which was a pretty good restaurant, as I remember it). Later he opened The Staunton Grocery here in Virginia, which was admired to the point that a Chancellorsville restaurant, Glass Haus Kitchen,



Ian Boden operates on an Edwards ham, Virginia's best.

was created as a star vehicle for him. It lasted a little more than a year, from Halloween 2012 to Thanksgiving 2013, but that was long enough to get him on the so-called "long list" of semifinalists for a regional James Beard Award, and to earn an admiring review from influential *Washington Post* critic Tom Sietsema.

The sheer range of The Shack remains unknown to nearly everybody—"Well-Known Chef to Serve Burgers," it was announced in the local paper, *The News Leader*—and when I went in, it was just the third service they had done, and Boden was still serving the tasting menu only on Friday and Saturday nights. "But if people start coming, I'll start doing it every night," he says.

I think they will come. It would be madness not to.

JOSH OZERSKY is a James Beard Award winning food writer. His food Q&A column, *Ask Eat Like a Man*, appears weekly at Esquire.com.



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