

THE WEEK OF MARCH 14 - 20, 2019

There’s a Breath of Spring (And New Names) for Two Rumson Restaurants

Story and photos by Eileen Moon

Two of Rumson’s landmark restaurants are greeting spring with a fresh direction and a reaffirmation of their strong connections to the community.

At Ridge Road and Avenue of Two Rivers, the elegant Victorian building that was long home to the legendary French restaurant Fromagerie has been reborn as The Rumson House.

And on River Road, the former What’s Your Beef/Russell & Bette’s is now Victory Park Tavern.

Owners of both restaurants have chosen names that honor each restaurant’s deep roots in the borough.

At the Rumson House, owners Paul and Enilda Sansone have carefully redesigned their restaurant to provide a comfortable ambience that retains the flavor of its elegant past.

“We wanted to modernize,” explained Executive Chef Mike J. Dunston, but



Chef Peter O’Connell, Victory Park Tavern, Rumson

they were committed to doing so in a way that honored the tradition of fine dining that Fromagerie always exemplified.

“It’s a new generation,” he continued. While people still seek a fine dining experience, the palates and preferences of diners have evolved, and

the formality that was once part of a special occasion has relaxed as well.

Dunston, who apprenticed in Rye, New York with renowned chef and culinary gold medalist Edward Leonard, presides over a kitchen staff that prides itself on making virtually everything they



Executive Chef Mike J. Dunston, The Rumson House

serve from scratch, including mayonnaise and mustard. All of their desserts, including crème brulee and pot de crème, are also house-made. “We try not to buy anything that we can make,” he said.

For diners seeking an over-the-top experience, The Rumson House offers The Toma-

hawk, a three-pound, bone-in, rib-eye carved tableside and served with truffle-mashed potatoes and candied cherry Brussels sprouts.

On the more casual end, The Rumson House offers burgers – Tuesday is burger night – and their own take on traditional chicken

fingers. “We do duck fingers,” Dunston said.

While diners who enjoy the classics can still order Dover sole, Dunston has enlivened the menu with options that include beef carpaccio, salmon with lobster risotto and heirloom tomato confit and specials like suckling pig.

In addition to sourcing the best produce available, Dunston is committed to purchasing meats and poultry that are humanely raised. “The animal has to be respected even in death. There is no waste.”

With the weather beginning to warm, Dunston is looking forward to planting a vegetable and herb garden on the property. “Then we will be a real farm-to-table,” he said, adding that the improvements made to date have been well received, there will definitely be more

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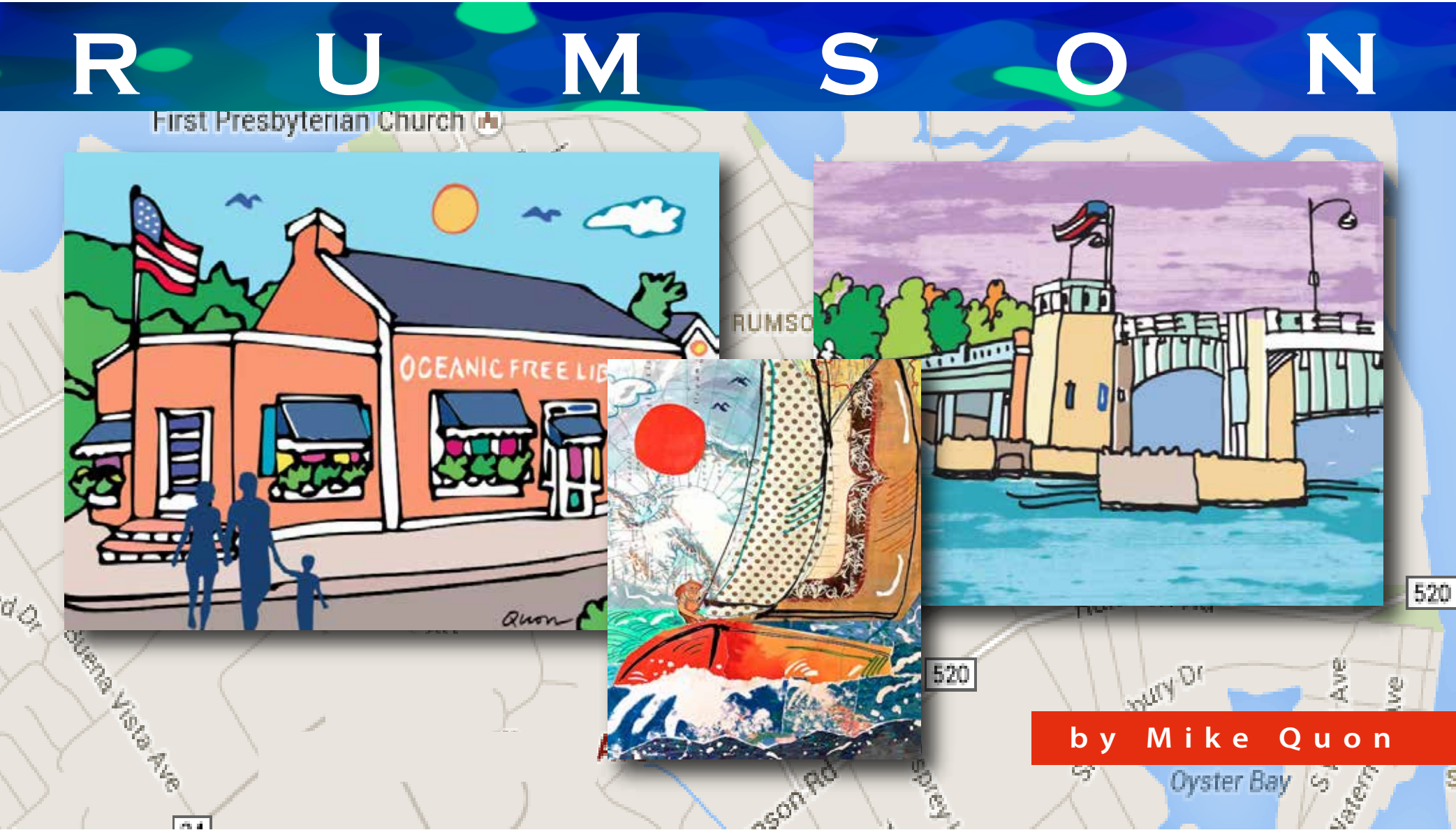
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AROUND RUMSON



Restaurants

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to come. “We’re not done yet,” he said with a smile. “I want our customers to be happy, and I want a business where my employees can come in to work and be happy, too.”

At Victory Park Tavern, restaurant partners Nicole and Robert Laub and Chef Peter O’Connell are nearing completion of an exterior renovation that has brightened the restaurant and heightened its visibility.

An accordion window has been installed in the bar area, making it possible to open it up to the breeze when the weather warms. A wider entryway with a glass door and larger windows in the dining room bring

warmth and welcome light to the interior.

The restaurant is located directly across the street from the park that inspired its name. “We wanted to connect more with the community, and we liked the name ‘Victory Park,’” said Laub. “It just felt very fitting for the time and the area.”

The partners have worked hard to create an ambience that is welcoming and a menu that is simply delicious.

“We offer seasonal American cuisine using fresh, local ingredients,” O’Connell explains. “We try to use the best products that are available at the time of year. Not only do I think it’s good for the customers, but it’s good for me as a chef. It motivates me and keeps my ideas fresh.”

With many years in the restaurant business – he owned and ran the popular Pas-

ta Fresca restaurant in Shrewsbury for 20 years – O’Connell believes VPT may be his last stop. “I’m excited about what we’re doing here and I’m optimistic,” he said.

Popular menu offerings include a lobster risotto, made with shelled lobster fresh from Doug Douty’s Lusty Lobster in Highlands. Often, he will call them to ask what they expect to have coming in and build a special around that. “They’re happy to deal with us. They use a lot of sustainable products.”

VPT also offers a 14-ounce double-cut pork chop with apple bourbon glaze, served with seasonal Vidalia onion, au gratin potatoes and wilted spinach. “There’s been great feedback on that,” O’Connell said.

Another favorite O’Connell created is a vegetarian eggplant meatball appetizer.

“It’s a two-day process to make. The sauce is a fresh tomato sauce made with peeled and seeded tomatoes.”

Each entrée has a recommended wine pairing. “All of our recommended pairings are made by a certified wine educator,” notes Laub. “It not only takes the guesswork out of ordering wine, but the wine is paired perfectly with the meal.”

“One thing we’ve tried to do is expand our menu to include sandwiches and burgers,” said Laub. Made with a Kobe brisket and chuck blend, the burgers garnered praise from one diner as “the best burger in Monmouth County.”

It’s the kind of feedback that the partners are very happy to hear. “If it isn’t really good, we don’t serve it,” Laub said. “We’re really trying to do this right.”

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