

Food for Thought, and Eating Of Course

Classic tales from Alexandria's classic restaurants.

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
GAZETTE PACKET

Hope Nelson combined her love of food and experience as a history buff to produce her recently released book, "Classic Restaurants of Alexandria."

"We moved to Alexandria 15-1/2 years ago and have loved the restaurant scene." Nelson says her book took about sixteen months to complete with the research and writing taking a full 12 months. Then came months of editing and proofing.

It took Nelson a couple of attempts to settle on where her book was going. "I thought the best way was to interview restaurant people—the managers, the customers, the waiters." But after interviewing person after person, she discovered that "although it was great and completely informative, it was just one long news story. I wanted it to be a patchwork of the city and its history."

So Nelson took a different direction. She spent a lot of time at the Alexandria Library



Hope Nelson, author of newly released "Classic Restaurants of Alexandria"

Local History Special Collections studying pages through 100 years of articles from the Washington Post, the Alexandria Gazette Packet and other media.

"Then I felt inspired. I got really rolling. I was pulling from the ages of when the writing took place." At the end of the day Nelson focused on restaurants from a diverse group, incorporating the history and "the microcosm of cultures, religions, socioeconomic status and more." But she says, "no illusions. I couldn't get them all in."

But, she says with a smile, "that leaves room for volume 2."

Nelson took all of the present day photos in the book. Some of the rest of yesteryear came from local history and special collections. She attributed her success in this area to the local librarians. "To a person they were so friendly and knowledgeable. I felt like one of the gang within a week." Her book includes vignettes arranged by subject such as Family Dining, Celebrating the Coast and Alexandria's International Hot Spots.

"The richly woven Alexandria culinary fabric has run the gamut." She said, "So many of these footprints had been here before."

Nelson writes of the "Curse of 100 King Street" where the building hasn't changed much in more than a century but a succes-

sion of restaurants have rotated through the space beginning with the Corn Palace and a grocery store in 1871 to the current newly opened Mia's in the same space. She writes about Le Gaulois, which stood on King Street for more than two decades but since closing in 2009 has been the home to a succession of restaurants.

Nelson came across some funny stories. "I've got to find humor in everything I do."

She reports the Beachcombers Restaurant used to rise above the Potomac River on stilts. Customers enjoyed dining above, rather than adjacent to, the water. Although it was closed in 1954 due to a fire, people still talk about how Alice Roosevelt liked to look at the lily pads from the restaurant. And since the restaurant was rumored to be located in D.C. waters, it could stay open later, and no one seems to have challenged it."

She traces the restaurant scene from the opening of Gadsby's Tavern in 1792 "where no less than six presidents have used it for receptions and grand balls." Today's ambiance remains the same and the menu still features peanut soup and Gentlemen's Pye. At the other end of the history spectrum is Misha's Coffee Roaster and Coffeehouse on King Street, "an anti-Starbucks kind of bohemian."

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NEWS

Classic Restaurants

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Nelson holds a full time job and writes a weekly food column for the Alexandria Gazette so, "I wrote when I could find the time, mostly at night and on Saturday mornings. I do everything better in the morning," including training for her triathlons. "I finished my book just three weeks before it was time to begin training for my next triathlon."

Nelson held her first book signing Dec. 11 at the Union Street Public House, also featured in her book. "Because I feel restaurants are so fun, we held it at a pub where people could eat and drink and chat." Union Street Public House, just across from the river, has its roots in a building that has been in place since the 1790s.

Nelson's next book signing is scheduled for Jan. 18 at 10 a.m. at the Alexandria Visitor's Center.

BULLETIN BOARD

Submit civic/community announcements at ConnectionNewspapers.com/Calendar. Photos and artwork welcome. Deadline is Thursday at noon, at least two weeks before event.

WEDNESDAY/DEC. 18

Winter Recreation Registration.

Registration for winter classes and activities offered by the City of Alexandria's Department of Recreation, Parks and Cultural Activities will begin at 9 a.m. on Dec. 18 for city residents and Dec. 20 for nonresidents. Winter registration applies to programs taking place January through mid-April 2020. To register or learn more about winter recreation programs offered by the City, visit alexandriava.gov/Recreation.

THURSDAY/DEC. 19

Community Meeting.

6:30-8 p.m. At City Hall Sisters Cities Conference Room 1101, 301 King Street, Alexandria. The Alexandria Waterfront Commission will hold a community meeting to receive comments on the potential use of the portion of 2 King St. that includes eight parking spaces. The City of Alexandria received an unsolicited proposal to develop the parking lot portion of the property located at 2 King St., which was acquired by the City through a settlement agreement with the Old Dominion Boat Club. The portion of the property formerly used for the Old Dominion Boat Club building and parking lot was replaced with Waterfront Park in November 2018. The property to be discussed at the community meeting is not the park area, but the remaining portion with eight parking spaces located across Strand Street, which is currently leased for private parking. The City has not decided on the future use of these eight parking spaces and is interested in hearing from the public about what kinds of public or private uses would be

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