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SMALL CITY, BIG APPETITE

Once New England's carb capital, Providence, Rhode Island, has become a stealth dining mecca. Chalk it up to a rich Italian heritage, a diverse immigrant population, and some old-style moxie. **BY JODY ROSEN**

▼ From left: Alfresco dining in Providence's Federal Hill neighborhood; Kristen O'Loughlin, the pastry chef at Persimmon restaurant.

FOR DECADES, the food most widely associated with Providence, Rhode Island, was coffee milk. Named the official state drink in 1993, it's a mixture of milk and "coffee syrup," which is prepared by straining water and sugar through coffee grounds. The sugar vibrates your taste buds, the caffeine rings your bell. This headlong attack on the palate (and the waistline) typifies the blunt approach to cuisine that prevailed for years in the biggest city in the nation's smallest state. "The local standard was pretty straightforward," Champe Speidel, the chef at the superb New American restaurant Persimmon, told me. "Twelve ounces of protein

and a pound of starch to go with it."

Vestiges of that kind of old-school dining do still survive in 21st-century Providence: you can get a silky coffee milk at White Electric, a shabby-chic café near Federal Hill, or a sugar-dusted butterball cookie at the nearby Scialo Brothers Bakery, which has been around since 1916. But Providence has also emerged as an unlikely destination for food lovers, with many of the gastronomic pleasures the big cities of the Northeast offer and some small-city charms they don't. At Oberlin, a sleek but friendly neighborhood joint that opened two years ago in the historic downtown, the plates—glistening slabs of raw weakfish and black bass, marinated mussels with chili and sweet potato—arrive like wonderments from an enchanted realm. In fact, Benjamin Sukle, a James Beard Award-nominated chef who once worked at Copenhagen's Noma, sources ingredients for these dishes from the famously fruitful local fishing grounds. (Sukle's other much-lauded fine-dining restaurant, Birch, sits five blocks away.)

Providence, the home of Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design, has a



FROM LEFT: SCOTT INDERMAUR/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; N. MILLARD/COURTESY OF GOPROVIDENCE



From left: Grilled pizza at Al Forno; Lois Scialo Ellis, co-owner of Scialo Brothers Bakery.

reputation as a poky town-and-gown city with a mafia history and a wild, corrupt political culture. But it also has an increasingly polyglot population, lively neighborhoods, and vital art and music scenes. The city's restaurants reflect this cosmopolitan side. One key to the transformation of Providence dining lies in a lesser-known academic institution, the College of Culinary Arts at Johnson & Wales University, which has been training chefs since 1973. Once, Johnson & Wales graduates skipped town as soon as they received their diplomas. But in the past decade or so they've been sticking around and starting their own restaurants.

The bridge between traditional and progressive dining in Providence, and the spiritual heart of its culinary world, is Al Forno, a farm-to-table Italian redoubt that opened in 1980. Four decades after the wife-and-husband team Johanne Killeen and George Germon accidentally invented their distinctive, now-trendy style of grilled pizza, Al Forno's two-story space just east of downtown remains comfortable and convivial, its food a study in depth and deliciousness. An evening spent

beneath the trellises on the garden patio, washing down the pizza or the roasted stuffed rabbit with a good Umbrian red, may create the illusion that the river less than 100 yards away is not the Providence but the Tiber.

More flavors of Italy can be found on Federal Hill, in the gourmet stores and trattorias that line Atwells Avenue and DePasquale Square. Unlike the quasi-Disneyfied Little Italys of so many cities, Federal Hill is a living community. The daughters of the Scialo brothers still run the namesake bakery, which has a perfectly preserved 1930s interior lined with stacks of almond biscotti and cappuccino walnut cakes.

But in 2019, Providence speaks in many accents. On College Hill, the two-year-old Den Den Korean Fried Chicken serves fiery double-fried chicken wings, armored in a scaly batter and spiced with scalding chili, along with other Korean dishes. Downtown, there's the year-old Yoleni's, an airy, cafeteria-style Greek restaurant and marketplace with hundreds of delicacies unavailable elsewhere in the U.S. (Its other branch is in Athens.) A Greek-yogurt bar holds several house-made flavors, each delectably salty and as thick as spackling paste.

Providence is now majority Latino, and in neighborhoods like Elmwood and Olneyville, you'll find an impressive profusion of taquerias, trucks serving the Dominican burgers known as

TRIP PLANNER

During a three-day visit to the city, I stayed at the **Dean** (thedeanhotel.com; doubles from \$129), a sleek downtown hotel that has become a hub for the new creative Providence. This spring, the 294-room **Graduate** (graduatehotels.com; doubles from \$161) opened in the former Biltmore Hotel, an easy walk to some of the city's best restaurants. —J.R.

Al Forno alforno.com; entrées \$21–\$45.

Birch birchrestaurant.com; prix fixe \$60.

Den Den Korean Fried Chicken dendenhospitality.com; entrées \$13–\$36.

Los Andes losandesri.com; entrées \$15–\$48.

Oberlin oberlinrestaurant.com; entrées \$8–\$20.

Persimmon persimmonri.com; entrées \$9–\$30.

Scialo Brothers Bakery scialobakery.com.

White Electric whiteelectriccoffee.com.

Yoleni's yolenis.com.

chimis, and a slew of other restaurants specializing in Salvadoran *pupusas*, Guatemalan *pepianes*, and Bolivian *salteñas*. Los Andes, on an unassuming corner in Elmhurst, is a vivacious Bolivian-Peruvian restaurant that serves dishes like *lechón al horno*—roast suckling pig—and tangy, spicy ceviches that rival any you can find in Lima.

In the city's more upscale eateries, the influence of Johnson & Wales is inescapable. Sukle is an alumnus, as is Speidel, who rolled into town from Florida 25 years ago in a battered pickup. "I knew I wanted to cook, but I knew nothing about Providence," he told me. "I thought Rhode Island was an arts colony." After running Persimmon for 11 years in suburban Bristol, in 2016 Speidel moved the restaurant to a larger space on a tree-lined block near the summit of College Hill. One evening, I took a meandering stroll to the restaurant, wending my way uphill past 18th-century homes and glowing streetlamps. Persimmon cast its own kind of spell. The room is warm and handsome. The dishes arrived in wave after wave: summer



squash soup with dill and basil; truffle beignets with Taleggio; a salad of radishes, kimchi, and avocado; slow-roasted chicken breast with ratatouille; *burrata*-filled ravioli with fava beans. The meal was topped off by vanilla *panna cotta* with passion-fruit gelée and a house-made raspberry liqueur. It was superlative food—and a lot of it. Yet as I made my way back down College Hill, I found myself longing for a nightcap. Something sweet and delicious, maybe with a caffeine kick. I set off in search of coffee milk. ●

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