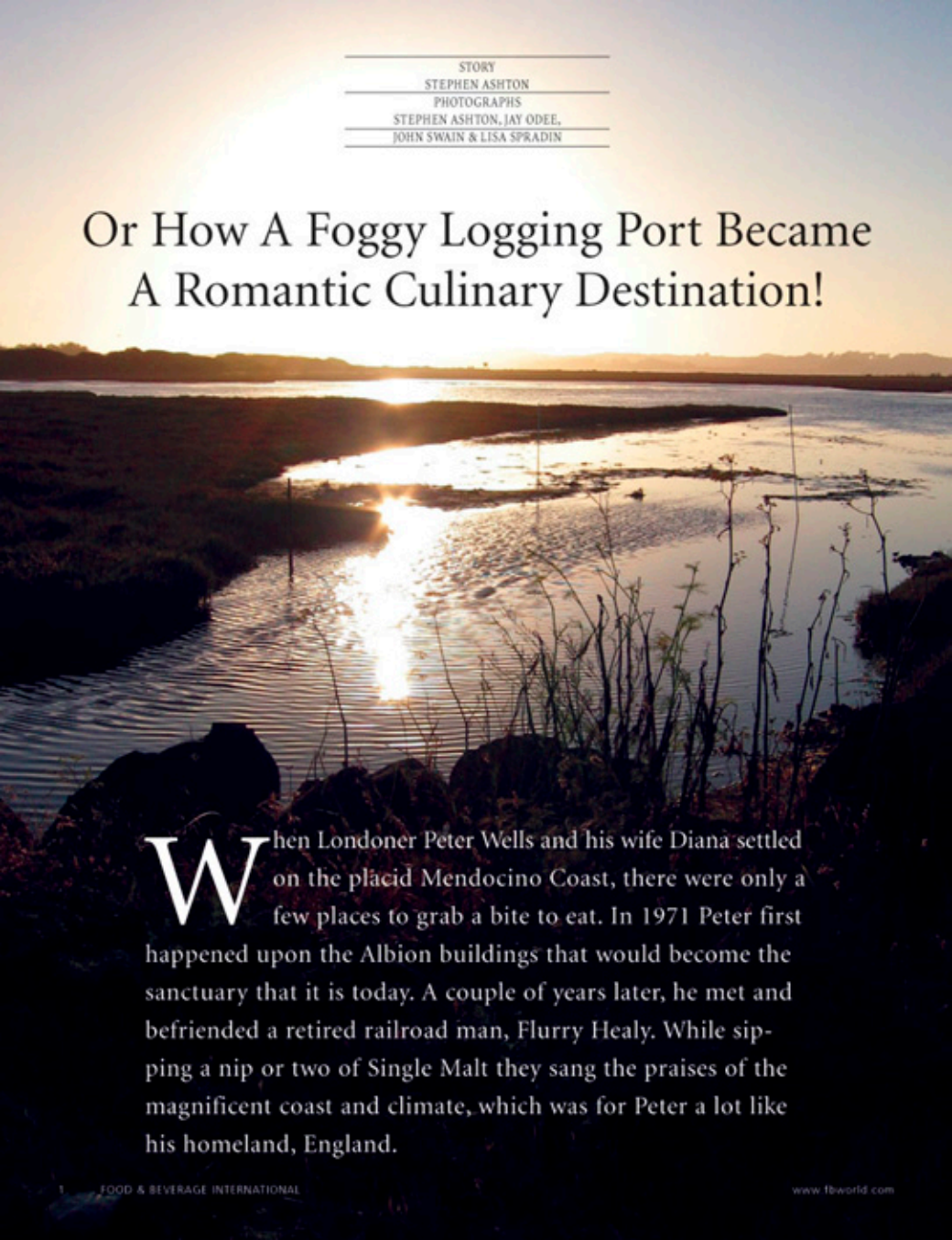




Owner Peter Wells & Flurry Hooley

THE ALBION RIVER INN



STORY
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PHOTOGRAPHS
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Or How A Foggy Logging Port Became A Romantic Culinary Destination!

When Londoner Peter Wells and his wife Diana settled on the placid Mendocino Coast, there were only a few places to grab a bite to eat. In 1971 Peter first happened upon the Albion buildings that would become the sanctuary that it is today. A couple of years later, he met and befriended a retired railroad man, Flurry Healy. While sipping a nip or two of Single Malt they sang the praises of the magnificent coast and climate, which was for Peter a lot like his homeland, England.



Albion River Inn Restaurant



Chef Stephen Smith



Uncle Furry and Chef Stephen Smith at the Albion Bar, famous for its collection of Single Malt Scotch

When the Albion property went up for sale in the late 1970s, the two entrepreneurs, who had by then become very good friends, decided to buy the place which originally was only two buildings, but the location... ah, location! location! location! Perched on a bluff overlooking stunning coastal-scapes on the north side of the Albion River, their place could be seen easily by travelers. "I have to confess," the stylish Brit says as if it would be a secret, "we really wondered who in the hell would want to come to Albion."

To call Albion a "town" is an overstatement but it does have a post office, general store and... now one of the best damned places to eat and stay on the North coast.

It also has its share of lore. Legend has it that Sir Francis Drake named California "New Albion" after annexing it to his motherland England, then known as Albion. Another Englishman, William Anthony Richardson, was given a parcel of land in the 1800s along the North Coast from the Mexican government which he called Albion Rancho Desino. He named the river at its center, Albion.

The transformation from a fisherman's bar and bohemian entertainment spot to its current incarnation is as colorful a story as one could find anywhere. The 1919 building was first a Blacksmith shop, then a Ford dealership, a grocery store with fish bait, a hamburger place and finally a restaurant in the 1940's.

The two entrepreneurs gutted the building in 1981 making it a bit more fashionable. "We couldn't move too quickly because we wanted to keep the place local friendly – and I kind of like

it that way," Flurry says. "By the mid 80's the B&B scene took off and we really started to grow."

Peter's son David, who acquired a taste for cooking at a young age, and Flurry's young nephew, Stephen Smith, helped the chef in the kitchen. One night a group of businessmen who had made reservations arrived at the restaurant but nothing had been prepared!

"We had a great chef at that time but sometimes, well, he would have his 'spells' and would be rendered incapacitated. David and Stephen, just teenagers, were pressed into service to prepare the meal and as fate would have it, the group was delighted by their fare," says Flurry. Peter proudly adds that David went on to work as a private chef for such luminaries as Steve Jobs and George Lucas and is now a highly respected nutritionist (www.nutracoach.com).

Stephen relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area to pursue his culinary interests where he worked at the renowned Stars under Jeremiah Tower. He attended and graduated from the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco in 1991, followed by a stint at Sacramento's acclaimed Chinois East/West working with owner/chef David Soo Hoo. Stephen returned to the Albion River Inn to rejoin its culinary team in 1993 and at the age of 26 took the reins as Executive Chef. In 1997, he was given the distinction of being Invited Guest Chef at the James Beard Foundation in Greenwich Village, where he prepared a Mendocino Christmas dinner for the Foundations guests. "We actually brought all of the ingredients with us on the plane. It was quite a scene," Stephen humbly shares.



Fennel and Black Pepper Crusted Ahi



Cod and Shellfish



Oven Roasted Quail



Broule with Raspberries

Chef Stephen Smith calls his acclaimed and innovative style, Coastal Cuisine, a lively mix of Asian, Mediterranean, regional flavors and fresh seafood, especially with local products. His culinary creations are made from the freshest local and regional ingredients, infused with complex flavors that utilize reductions, purees and sauces to complement the taste, texture and design of each dish.

That night our dinner featured a series of "sampler" dishes expertly paired with Deerfield Ranch (Sonoma Valley) Wines: Fennel and Black Pepper Crusted Ahi Tuna, served rare with a nappa cabbage salad, sesame (fresh and roasted), soy & ginger dipping sauce; marinated cucumbers and wasabi. Succulent and delicious.

Oysters Gratinée: fresh Washington oysters, in a rich cream sauce with mushrooms, garlic, Pernod, lemon & wilted spinach, topped with herbed Japanese breadcrumbs & served golden. A fine combination of flavors.

Lime & Ginger Grilled Prawns: sweet jumbo Mexican white shrimp marinated & basted on the grill with lime, ginger, garlic & soy, sauced with tangy cilantro/lime butter, served with steamed coconut Jasmine rice & caramelized beets. This reminds me of the Yucatan and is a favorite of regulars.

Oven-Roasted Quail: tender birds, wrapped in honey-cured bacon & marinated with Burgundy vinegar, garlic, rosemary & soy, finished with sweet butter & served with toasted orzo pasta-wild rice blend and caramelized beets. Very tasty and fun to eat.

Poached Asian Pears with cloves and fresh vanilla beans with vanilla sautéed cinnamon wontons. Delicious....

After this exceptionally fresh and flavorful meal, we meandered back to our cozy cabin with its custom Jacuzzi bath and balcony overlooking the sea. A toasty fire was the perfect setting for a night cap.

The offshore foghorn warns sailors of the jagged coast that has claimed countless ships since the 1600s when the Portuguese, in the service to the King of Spain, were the first to explore the coast. The Albion River Inn provides earplugs for those who want to block out the singing horn.

There are no TVs so don't even think about it! But there is plenty of "entertainment" from the natural stage of gardens, sky and sea. At dawn, we were awakened by a rare thunder storm and a magnificent show of lightning. Locals said they had not seen such a display in years while some worried about the fires that the storm had ignited.

Mid morning we meet with Chef Stephen Smith in his kitchen. He is soft spoken, friendly and knowledgeable. With the sea being a constant inspiration his menu offers six or seven fresh seafood dishes nightly. As Stephen prepares to smoke his own salmon I ask him what he considers to be the most important aspect of being a successful chef.

He responds instantly with: "Team Work! We are a team here and I am proud of the fact that all of my guys have been with me for years. And my purveyors have been with me for years as well. I have used the same seafood guy for the last 11 years. I wish more chefs would get the idea that their team members are their greatest asset."

"Some chefs think that all the dishes should be done exactly BY THE



BOOK. They don't even want the staff to taste the food. Who wants to stay at a place like that! Flurry, who joins us overhears and adds, "Steve also has a great palate and a real instinct for great cuisine."

Steve loves to travel especially when he can bring back a nuance or recipe he discovers abroad. His favorites are

Asia, particularly Korea, India, Nepal and Thailand. He cooks 4 days a week and can often be found surfing when the North Coast curl is at its best.

He is working on a book and teaches a series of Cooking Classes each March & November and oversees the Albion Winemaker Dinners.

HOME SMOKED SALMON

Chef Stephen examines the freshly caught Salmon which has been soaking from 12 to 24 hours in a marinade/Brine solution of:

- 2 cups soy sauce
- 2 cups burgundy white vinegar
- 2 cup brown sugar
- 2 cup Kosher salt

3-4 tsp/ea Ground fennel & ground cloves

Be sure to lightly prick the flesh side of the Salmon to let the marinade sink in. Put in the brine flesh side down. Stephen uses a stove-top improvised smoker made from a few ordinary large stainless "hotel" pans nested perforated pan inside a covered pan.

Soak Applewood or Cherry Wood (or sometimes Hickory) for 5 to 10 minutes and drain.

Put the soaked chips in the bottom pan first, then cover them with some dry chips. The Salmon is put into the smaller perforated pan skin side down, which is put into the bigger pan. Keep the flame first at medium high to get a good smoke going (10 minutes), then turn the flame down to medium low for another 20 to 25 minutes on the low side to prevent the fish from being baked. Once the Salmon has the degree of smoke desired (after about 30 mins.) be sure to let the Salmon rest for a minimum of 20 minutes. "We take it off the heat and set it aside covered for about a half hour, uncover it and set it aside until served." Stephen says, emphasizing "NEVER UNCOVER" it throughout the whole process to assure the right smoke."



This spectacular convergence of land, sea and sky is the perfect backdrop for yet another innovative cultural project that is inspired by Albion's

Flurry Healy, an accomplished photographer – The Photography Workshop with acclaimed photographer Robert Glenn Ketchum is scheduled for October 4th - 7th, 2004.

When you want to escape to a timeless beauty of the North Coast, the Albion River Inn offers the best of many worlds

The Albion River Inn

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