

TOURS & DETOURS

Richmond, Va., a welcoming city



Ralph Collier

Richmond, Va., a city easy to like, is a quick four-hour drive from the Main Line or an equal time via Amtrak. Its residents feel that a quadricentennial deserves a quintessential celebration. This state capital is observing the 400th anniversary of its founding with a number of world class events this

summer and fall.

Richmond was founded by, among others, Capt. John Smith of Jamestown fame. William Byrd named the town after the Thames River in England. Patrick Henry lit the fires of revolution when he delivered his "Give me liberty or give me death" speech at St. John's Church. The year was 1775.

Breakfast on the first day is at a diner called Perly's, a former furniture store. The occupants seem like characters in a sitcom. The waitress has a studded nose, and many of the T-shirted clientele sport tattoos as they agonize over the lavish menu. The brass cash register is a relic, and there are countless trophies adorning the walls. A hostess makes nice with the customers. We like the restaurant's philosophy: "Treat yourself. Life is uncertain. Order dessert first. Ours are suPERLYtive!" The cuisine is sort of nouvelle down

home.

Richmond, with a population of 250,000, has become a good restaurant town. One brasserie called CanCan is situated in a former bridal shop, run by a man who apprenticed with chefs in Paris. There are beers from Belgium, France and Germany, and the chef's culinary prowess is untouchable. Among minor gems, there is a Croque Monsieur; Croque Madame is served with the addition of two fried eggs.

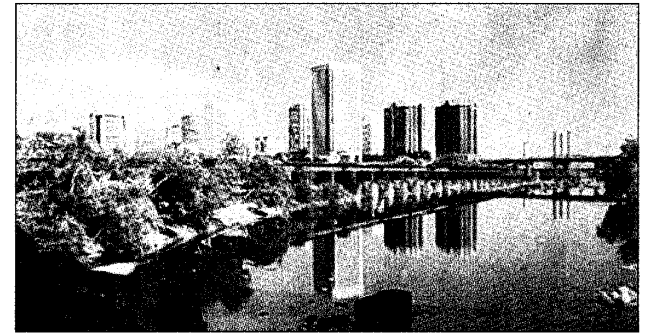
Dinner at Acacia, formerly a Baptist church, recalls the Irish proverb "Be neither intimate nor distant with the clergy." No reason to worry. There is something confidently sophisticated about Acacia. Exhibit A: roasted duck breast stuffed with apples and pine nuts wrapped with applewood bacon in a red wine onion marmalade.

Breakfast on another day is at

the Riverside Diner, a two-story affair with many TV monitors, ersatz brick walls and large posters advertising products of yore such as Eskimo pie and cartons of Lucky Strike.

Millie's is another diner right out of a 1930s movie, packed with a knowing crowd who line up for lunch in enough of a crush to give a fire marshal pause. The food is astonishingly good - country cookin' gone cool. One of the rewards for patiently waiting for your table is a Mimosa or Bloody Mary as others are enjoying their soft scrambled eggs with lobster and hollandaise, a huge spicy egg and crab enchilada or a true local discovery, Devil's Mess. Haute diner cuisine indeed.

Frits Huntjens at 1 North Belmont is a chef who serves delicacies such as a sole Meuniere, which he filets at your table. It is the genuine McCoy, with a caper



The skyline of Richmond.

and lemon sauce served with seasonal veggies and pommes Parisienne. His dazzling high wire act includes a Caneton Rouennais au Porto, a pan seared duck breast with a port and duck demi glace and a fruit compote. 1 North Belmont is a true winner, with a superb soufflé au Grand Marnier as a reward for cleaning your plate.

The American Civil War Center, like Philadelphia's Constitution Center, is largely interactive, with films, handsomely mounted installations and historical objects. For instance, by lifting small metal rods that look like your

car's dipstick, you are fed answers to rare questions about the war. There are canons, swords and grenades. It is marvelously uncomplicated.

Lewis Ginter Botanical Gardens offers exotic flowers in gently rolling terrain. At one time, this was the hunting grounds of the Powhatan Indians. Its director feels that it will always be a place for aesthetic expression, a place valued for its inexplicable beauty, as well as for its didactic and practical endeavors. So will Meadow Farms, a museum a dozen miles

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from Richmond that includes a flourishing farm and alfresco exhibits on the culture of the South.

The Virginia State Capitol is one of the city's nonpartisan showplaces, architecturally appealing in the extreme. Rumor has it that countless summers ago, when the legislature was debating whether to fund a state zoo, one senator recommended: "Just put a fence around the State Capitol."

For more information, please visit www.2007.Richmond.com or www.visit.Richmond.com or call 1-804-648-2007.

Ralph Collier is a member of the Society of American Travel Writers, the International Food, Wine, and Travel Writers Association, and the International Motor Press Association. His syndicated programs are heard on 32 radio stations. Locally, he can be heard Monday through Friday at 10 a.m. on WRTI 90.