

[Eat+Drink]

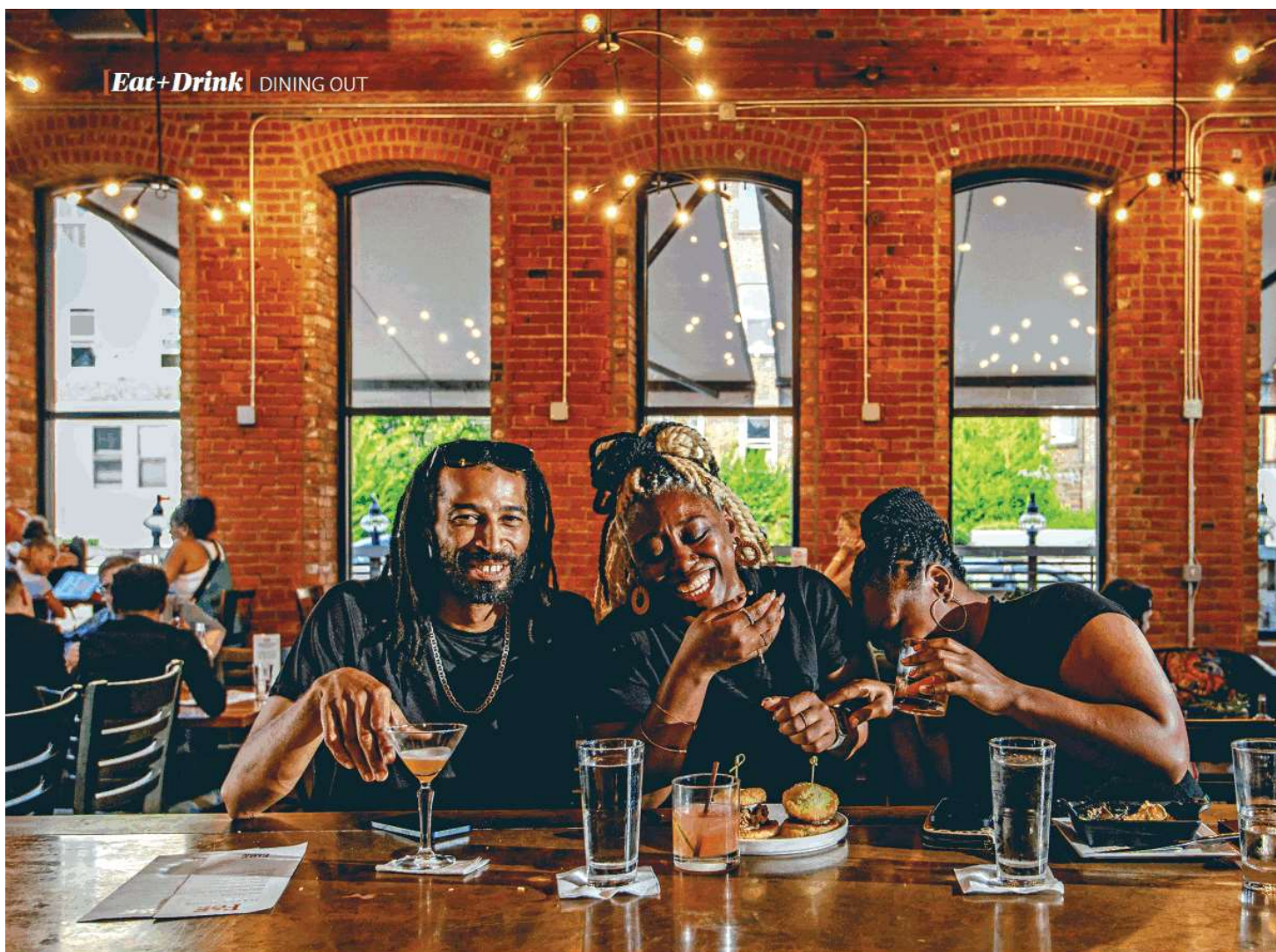
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RELIGHTING THE FIRE

In Hartford's Frog Hollow neighborhood, a new restaurant is operating with a refreshed concept but a familiar philosophy. Fire by Forge serves up a Pan-American menu, along with carrying on the mission of its predecessor, Firebox, to provide a service to the community. ➤



LISA NICHOLS



Restaurant, Reforged

Picking up where Firebox left off, Hartford's Fire by Forge serves a diverse pan-American menu and resources for people in need.

By James Gribbon

This summer, a beloved Hartford dining space began its second life. The restaurant, Fire by Forge, formerly the well-regarded Firebox before closing—regrettably as many restaurants did in 2020—has a refreshed concept but a similar mission: to be the home of Hartford's second chance.

Located in the capital's Frog Hollow neighborhood, the restaurant—with its enticing and variable pan-American menu—is also an enterprise of Forge City Works, which gives job training to people with barriers to employment, such as poverty, incarceration, homelessness or addiction/recovery.

If that's what gets people in the door, excellent. I went for the food, and it didn't disappoint.

Fire by Forge opened for breakfast and lunch in May, and officially for dinner in July. "We're brand new," general manager Justin

Morales says. "At this point in my career I wanted to provide guidance to people like me."

Asked what that means, he explains that dyslexia led to an early exit from his school career, "but the restaurant world has this reputation of picking up misfits. It's a real meritocracy where your education and background don't have to matter.

"If I can give any guidance to people to find their chance for success, this is it."

Walk inside the warm, brick walls of Fire by Forge and you'll see the front room and bar, which is set up for breakfast cafe service early, then again for lunch and dinner in a tavern concept.

■ Fire by Forge's front bar area is a fun hangout spot.

→ Southern influence is seen in appetizers like pickled fried green tomatoes with an arugula corn salad, and biscuits with local honey.

↓ The Wheaton Up cocktail, inspired by Forge City Works founder Cary Wheaton.



FIRE BY FORGE 539 BROAD ST., HARTFORD

THE FOOD

From breakfast through dinner, Fire by Forge's well-curated, pan-American menu features everything from Peruvian-influenced pork tenderloin to California quinoa bowls, and Southern-fried chicken sandwiches.

THE VIBE

More casual than its Firebox predecessor, yet still upscale, the warm, 19th-century brick space is divided into the front breakfast (and later tavern) section, a middle area of booths hung with photos of the staff, and a rear "wine room" which can host larger groups in comfort.

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Open for breakfast/brunch, lunch & dinner Tue.-Sat.

203-727-8066,
firebyforge.com,

@firebyforge on Instagram

Wheelchair accessible



Happy hour runs 4:30 to 6 p.m., and offers snacks like elote yucca fries, tacos and sliders, and a raft of reasonably priced drinks.

Behind it, the middle "Trainees room" is hung with photos of past trainees and some current employees. "The restaurant is an extension of the program. We are a social enterprise," says Morales. "It's almost a lab."

Morales and executive chef Andrew Perri say their goal is for half the employees, front and back of the house, to be program graduates.

Set up for small groups of up to four at booths, the middle room tends to be a lunch hub.

Fire by Forge seems almost to move with the sun, gradually opening front to back, finalizing with what's currently being called the "wine room." This darker and larger, but more intimate, space is a relaxing setting, suitable for larger groups. During my visit,

two parties of 20 are seated on either side of the back room, with plenty of space between.

We begin with appetizers of Karrigan's biscuits and pickled fried green tomatoes, alongside apéritifs the Wheaton Up (a dirty martini with sriracha blue cheese-stuffed olives, named for Forge City Works founder Cary Wheaton), and the Rabo de Galo, akin to a cachaça-based Manhattan.

A real joy to this one-time Southerner, the biscuits are named for in-house baker and pastry chef Karrigan Pothier, whose childhood love of baking was furthered by a stint in the Kansas State University dining hall. His biscuits are served drizzled with local honey and a ball of compound butter folded with fresh garlic scape pesto. I could be convinced to drive back to Hartford for these alone, but they also show the thought and effort chef Perri and his staff put into the menu at FxP.

Perri moved from his native Philadelphia



← Pan-roasted branzino rests on a farro piccolo grain salad, and is accented by beet purée.

↓ On a wall in the “trainees” room, photos of current and former employees are proudly displayed.

to Canton, Conn., during high school, where his interest in food was sparked by the school’s culinary-focused home economics program. Perri spent time in Calabria (Italy’s “toe”) after working restaurant jobs in high school, and helped open Butchers & Bakers in Farmington before mutual connections landed him at Firebox, pre-pandemic.

I mention the fried green tomatoes, and he explains how they came to be. “We were doing R&D before opening, thinking about regional American foods for the menu. The Southern influence is so huge, and I love fried pickles, so I thought it was a way to change it up.”

They’re another winner. A simple dish that can sometimes be a little two-dimensional, the acid of the pickling cuts through the crispy batter of the fry, while a peppery arugula corn salad provides additional crunch, and maybe a little conscience-salve while you enthusiastically consume every fried morsel.

The restaurant works with local farms around the state in partnership with food hub Red Tomato, buying through a federal agricultural grant which funds local produce purchases. Diners, employees and farmers, all benefiting from one system.

We look over the main-course section of the menu and choose a duck breast molé and the pan-roasted branzino. Both dishes arrive founded on a grain salad of farro piccolo, or Einkorn wheat, but used in different ways. More of a chewy grain and vegetable salad with the duck, it’s prepared similarly to a risotto with the branzino, with white wine and vegetable stock producing a creamier counterpoint to the crispy-

skinned fish.

The glistening duck, served close to rare, is ringed by a pungent trail of smoky mole, which stands up well to the strong fowl. With the branzino, beet purée lends bright, intense color, and the added citrus flavor punches everything up with garnishes of fennel and mushrooms topping the mild fish.

Perri’s favorite dishes include the churrasco pork tenderloin, cooked *sous vide* and served with seasonal vegetables and an Incan red drop pepper coulis (sauce), and the steak frites dinner plate, served with chimichurri and yucca fries tossed with pimentón (smoky Spanish paprika) and oil. “I love simple but effective, and it’s a play on a more pan-American version,” he says.

You’ll see tuna poke, spicy mac and cheese, several sandwiches and vegetarian options on the menu: California salmon bowls sharing space with

fried chicken sandwiches, and tempeh “bacon” BLTs. A Philly cheesesteak empanada is a nod to the chef’s roots, while a quesadilla Salvadoreña is available for dessert.

“I want diners to experience how effective this mission is, enjoy being here,” he says, switching topics from the food to the mission. “You can see where the money goes.”

GM Justin Morales echoes the statement. “We don’t always hire the people who go through the program, because they get jobs at other places, but we have 10 to 12 people per class, paid apprenticeships. When you do make a hire, it means so much to them.”

“When guests come in, they’re not just getting food and drink, they’re literally participating in a social movement. They hear what we do and ask me ‘how do we volunteer?’ And I say to them *do exactly what you’re doing now*. You’re participating by being here, helping us train, spreading a good vibe. This isn’t a for-profit business. We have a revenue share where 5 percent of all money brought in gets spread among the entire staff. You’re spreading goodwill just by coming to happy hour.”

Plus, you know: the food’s good. ■

