

WELCOME INN

Leslie Hurley, at the door and in the kitchen, trimming lemon-thyme herbs she grows. A tray of her cranberry-raisin cookies.



Chef on a Mission

For 27 years, in all four seasons, Leslie Hurley of the Mission Inn in Cape May has been keeping pace with the changing tastes of her visitors. *By Lynn Martenstein*

Leslie Hurley, or Chef Leslie, as she's known at the Mission Inn in Cape May, used to make guests a dairy-rich sweet egg soufflé for breakfast. It was a popular dish for several years until a sea change in people's eating habits swept it off the menu.

Food trends and dietary restrictions have transformed what people eat since Hurley whisked her first egg at the bed-and-breakfast in 1994. "Less is more" wasn't trending then.

Guests' favorite foods today are Hurley's egg roulade with spinach, zucchini-egg pizza, and her breakfast salad with tomatoes, blueberries and house-made dressing. "People want lighter, healthier food now," explains the 64-year-old chef. "They want local produce, more egg dishes, less sugar and fewer sweets. Many have special dietary needs."

Inspired by her mother, who taught her to cook at age four, Hurley has developed a seasonally supple

repertoire that has earned many accolades, one of which is Tripadvisor's rating of the Mission Inn as the top B&B in Cape May for the past 11 years. Partly, this owes to Hurley being attuned to the times. Guests today are more physically active than they used to be. After breakfast, most head out on long walks, bike tours or kayak trips. "They don't want to start their day with a 1,000-calorie meal," she says.

Vicki and Ralph Unruh, frequent guests over the last 16 years, appreciate that Hurley remembers their food preferences without prompting. "I try not to eat flour or sugar," says Vicki, "so Leslie always makes me an omelet. I never have to remind her. She also knows that Ralph loves her lemon pancakes, so she serves them when we're there."

Hurley's twice-weekly shopping trips for local produce and other products typically cover 50 miles and involve half a dozen stops. Her go-to places, which she has cultivated over many years, include Sunny Slope

Farm in Bridgeton for peaches, nectarines and apples; Lillian's in Maurice for yellow watermelon; and Ingraldi's in Millville for sweet corn. Another is her beloved Amish Market in Hopewell, known for its bacon and sausage.

"I've known a few vegetarians," she says, "who just couldn't resist the smell of their maple bacon coming from our kitchen."

On her quests, Hurley's father, Jim, often keeps her company. "We're always looking for out-of-the-ordinary finds like pink blueberries to surprise our guests," she says.

The chef also has her pick of nearly 30 herbs and vegetables grown at the inn. Conveniently, her favorite spice, lemon thyme, which she uses in her vegetable-egg pizza, thrives just outside the kitchen's back door, reducing farm-to-table to a few steps.

At her home in Millville, Hurley rises at 5 AM, drives an hour to work while listening to cooking podcasts, and has breakfast planned by the time she pulls into the driveway. By 6:30 AM, she's prepping meats, peeling fruit and making baked goods.

Breakfast is served on the B&B's Spanish-mission-themed outdoor terrace, offering views of the ocean and the inn's landscaped grounds. "The beauty of the inn and the gentle breeze and salt air blowing across the veranda make my food taste better," Hurley says.

As guests linger over coffee and plan their day, Hurley prepares snacks for their return. She makes cranberry-raisin oatmeal cookies from scratch daily, and creates bento boxes with crudités, cheese and custom dips for happy hour.

"It takes a special chef to make food deliciously brand new year after year," write guests Mer and John Groch.

Hurley, an elementary school teacher for many years in Millville, is playful with her table settings. The inn has a dozen sets of plates, mugs and linens in bright primary colors that she mixes and matches daily to complement her menus. She also coordinates her aprons and shoes with the color schemes.

"Chef Leslie is the heart and soul of the inn," wrote repeat guests Bud and Maureen Kohler after a recent stay. "She greets us every morning with a smile on her face as she serves breakfasts that are delicious, healthy and works of art." 🍴



LEFT BANK BURGER

➤ Jersey City

STYLE Casual hipster spot with tin ceilings, exposed brick and cool, retro-look lighting. Outdoor seating offers optimal people watching.

THE SCOOP Innovative burgers are the name of the game. Every month, the team comes up with a unique mash-up for devotees to try.

THE MENU Grass-fed beef burgers top the menu in lots of varieties or make-your-own style, which can be chicken-breast, veggie or turkey burgers. The *Munster Mash*, pictured above, pairs a beef burger with peppered bacon, fried cheese and roasted-garlic aioli. Fries offer variety too, from the classic, with a crisp exterior and creamy interior, to sweet potato, disco (brown gravy and mozzarella) and Chilltown (chili, cheese, bacon and jalapeños). In addition to burgers are salads such as kale caesar and Tex Mex. Bar bites include the usual suspects—chicken fingers, Buffalo wings and nachos—but also refreshing offerings like fried pickles and fried mac and cheese pops.

HEADS UP Servings are sufficient, but not oversized. Daily happy hour from 4 to 7 PM features drink specials. Half a dozen beers on tap, plus bottles. —Deborah P. Carter

194 Newark Avenue
201-630-4127
lbburgerbar.com.com

Open for lunch and dinner, daily;
brunch, Sat and Sun
PRICE \$\$



CAFÉ LUNA

➤ Old Bridge

STYLE Sicilian staples served in a luxurious atmosphere. Tasteful suspended fixtures softly light the multiple dining rooms and synthesize with soft, blue mood light beamed through bottles at the bar under a romantic, starry ceiling.

THE SCOOP What started as a small muffuletta-style sandwich stand in Brooklyn more than 30 years ago has grown into a family-focused restaurant on our side of the Lower New York Bay.

THE MENU Lunch features traditional Italian appetizers such as baked clams, caprese salad and minestrone. There are creamy frittatas (such as spinach, cherry tomato and feta) and personal-size pizzas. The truffle pie comes with arugula, prosciutto, truffle oil and shaved Parmesan. Each pie is brought to your table on a hot wooden platter to keep it oven fresh. Entrées include penne in rich vodka sauce and a tender pork chop oreganata. For dessert, try the rainbow-cookie cake, inspired by Italian seven-layer cookies, or the sweet and buttery crème brûlée.

HEADS UP Football Sundays present the novelty of Buffalo-spiced everything. Watch the game on a big screen from one of the high-top tables in the lounge as you nibble on spicy Buffalo wings, Buffalo chicken pizza or crispy Buffalo calamari. —Olivia Beach

3679 Route 9 North
732-965-5490
cafelunanj.com

Open for lunch and dinner, daily
PRICE \$\$



LIVING ON THE VEG

➤ Manahawkin

STYLE Café with an indie-rock vibe and an all-vegan menu. Counter seating and tables indoors; tables on patio in warm weather. The soundtrack shuns pop and leans more to potent indie bands like the Clash.

THE SCOOP Lauren and Rob Ramos opened the original Living on the Veg (LOV) on Long Beach Island in 2005. That spot is now closed until spring. Manahawkin, on the mainland, opened this summer and will operate year-round.

THE MENU LOV serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as seasonal specials available all day. The Buffalo Ranch is a salad of spinach, romaine, mushrooms and Buffalo tempeh with ranch dressing. Raw tacos wrap walnut purée, salsa and guacamole in a romaine leaf. The avocado club features house-made hummus, avocado and veggies on multigrain toast. Meat alternatives such as tempeh, seitan and tofu bolster the Desayuno burrito, the Olde City cheesesteak and the BBQ Chuckwich. As a nod to locally landed seafood, they offer a vegan crab cake and, occasionally, a chowder. Whatever you order, add a side of XO Skewers—grilled tempeh with guangdong, a salty-sweet glaze from Guangdong, China.

HEADS UP Long before Covid labor shortages, vegan joints were known for unpredictable hours and random closings. It's sometimes the case at LOV, but the food is consistently excellent. Call ahead to check. —Jon Coen

657 East Bay Avenue, Unit 3
609-891-2383
livingonthevegbi.com

Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, Tues-Sat
PRICE \$\$\$ BYO

PRICES (most entrées) \$ under \$15 \$\$ \$15-\$25 \$\$\$ over \$25