

Rhododendron Cafe's Revival

By: Capitol Hill Times Staff

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Photos by Brandon Macz

Rhododendron Cafe chef Chase Smith in the new outdoor patio section of the restaurant. Chase says she's focused on Northwest style food that's healthy.

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The Rhododendron Cafe on First Hill's Virginia Mason campus sprouted back to life in January, after a lengthy remodel.

Under new management and with a new chef in the kitchen, the cafeteria-style dining is gone, replaced by a full-service experience.

"We totally renovated the whole place," said Kelsey Couch, dining room supervisor. "Looking at old photos, it felt kind of cafeteria-y and outdated."

The dining room and bar was updated, with the original rhododendron covered interior windows preserved.

"I feel like it's more rustic; that's the feeling I get from it," said chef Chase Smith.

A big draw is the patio section, which includes mellow hanging lights and new brick flooring. With Seattle's hot days, Couch said the patio offers cool respite for diners.

"Even when it's 95 degrees, it's 80 degrees out there," she said.



There is also a rooftop deck where patrons can enjoy drinks.

“It’s not very big, but it’s got a nice little view of the city,” Smith said.

Offering a menu that changes three times a year and that now includes weekend brunch, Smith said she’s focused on providing Northwestern style cuisine, much of which needs to be heart-healthy. Tucked inside the Inn at Virginia, one challenge is visibility within the hospital campus.

“So word of mouth has been really big,” she said, “and, OK, we’re not a cafeteria, we’re not hospital food.”

Smith has been with Columbia Hospitality for four years. The agency now manages Virginia Mason’s two hotels and the Rhododendron Cafe. She left her station at the Bell Harbor International Conference Center on Pier 66 to run the kitchen at the Rhododendron Cafe.



The lunch and dinner menu includes a number of soups, salads and sandwiches, with several seafood entrees that include seared halibut, sesame seed encrusted salmon and seared scallops. There is also a grab-and-go counter at the bar for quick bites.

Homemade purees, simple syrups and bloody Mary mix are used at the bar. First Hill Improvement Association executive director Alex Hudson tells the Capitol Hill Times a big draw should be the half-off price of bottles from 3-4 p.m.

Virginia Mason staff make up a large portion of the Rhododendron's lunch patrons, with neighborhood residents coming in on nights and weekends. Couch said the hope is to attract more locals, as the cafe continues to dispel old perceptions that it is just a place for hospital staff and visitors.

"I feel like brunch is really trendy right now," she said, "and a lot of people are looking for it."

The Rhododendron is open for breakfast 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. Monday-Friday and reopens for lunch and dinner 11-9 p.m. daily. Brunch is offered 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

Find out more at www.innatvirginiamason.com/restaurant.