



Kathy Watson

A long-time Gorge chef and restaurateur reinvents herself

story and photos by DAVID HANSON

“I was tired, like a marathoner who looks up at mile 23, floating along, a blister here or there, and is suddenly wracked by a deep thirst, a deathly weariness. I was ready to finish the race.”

This is Gorge chef and former restaurateur Kathy Watson describing, in a forthcoming memoir, her feelings as she closed her Hood River restaurant Nora’s Table in 2013. It was a moment of clarity for Watson but a major loss for the Gorge’s culinary scene. Both her restaurants, first Viento then Nora’s Table, achieved notoriety and respect among outside food critics and, more importantly to Watson, locals.

The menus changed with the seasons as Watson’s flavor artistry coalesced with her commitment to sourcing fresh, local ingredients from Gorge farms and ranches and Oregon Coast fisher people. The summers hummed with full tables, but lean winters always loomed over



Photo by Lauri Streaker



the most bustling fall weekends. Kitchen staff came and went or sometimes stayed too long. Vent fans broke, vital staff would give a week’s notice, a volatile chef would storm out in a rage. After over a decade making it work, Watson hung it up.

But not quite. Fortunately, Watson has found ways to continue creating unique food experiences. She’s left behind the brick-and-

Kathy Watson, top right, and Krystyna Livingston prepare a course for a Chef’s Collective dinner. Far left, Watson at her former restaurant, Nora’s Table.



Kathy Watson serves dinner guests at the Ruby June Inn in Husum.

mortar restaurant, but her Chef's Collective is entering its seventh year with a growing roster of talented chefs presiding over a dinner series hosted by the Ruby June Inn in Husum, Wash.

That's where I find Watson on a sub-freezing January evening. She's most excited about the crab remoulade. The creamy tangle of spiralized apples, watermelon radish, celery root and hand-plucked crab claws held together by the homemade remoulade is to be forked onto an oblong buttered poppy-seed brioche, also scratch-made by Watson and Krystyna Livingston, chef de cuisine at White Salmon Baking Co. and one of Watson's Chef's Collective accomplices.

The crab is only the second course after the "Normandy picnic," a plate anchored by foie gras mousse. Next comes what Watson calls, with a wink, Beanie Weanies, a rich cassoulet of duck, tarbais bean, pork shoulder and sausage and cured pork belly. The twenty guests seated at small candlelit tables in the Ruby June breakfast room or at the long farm table seem overly pleased, as if they're in on a secret.

The first meal Watson ever cooked was a can of Campbell's vegetable beef soup and a fried egg. She was five. Her father had recently passed away in a car crash and her mother was locked in her room, an early sign of worse things to come. Watson poured the can's contents into a pot and lit the burner as she'd seen her mother do. Then she lit another

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Longtime chef and former restaurateur Kathy Watson continues to create unique food experiences with her Chef's Collective dinners, now in their seventh year.

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burner and cracked an egg into a frying pan. The soup cooked fine, but the egg, without butter or oil, charred to a crispy layer that Watson scraped onto plates for her younger brother and her to eat. She remembers thinking at the time: *what if I just cooked the egg in the soup?*

Throughout her early adult life, cooking was equal parts necessity and curiosity. She developed flavor profiles and recipes in home kitchens, not restaurants. Her patrons were her children, family, and occasional guests.

While living in remote Lakeview, Ore., with her first husband who could not eat salt, she learned to make savory foods using the power of acid (vinegars), citrus (squeeze of lemon), and the simple method of heat to invigorate the frying pan's fond (caramelized remnants). She made her own salt-free ketchup, crackers and bread, and improvised international dishes with the regional staple, hamburger beef. At the time she owned three cookbooks — *Betty Crocker Cookbook*, *Middle East Cookery*, and *More With Less*, a Seventh-Day Adventist manual. She'd read the recipes on soup cans and tear ideas out of doctor's office magazines, then wing it at home with her salt-free loopholes. She and the other housewives in that mill town traded recipes like gossip.

Eventually Watson left Lakeview for Salem where she worked in state government communications before becoming editor-in-chief of *Oregon Business Magazine*, all while hosting and cooking for political fundraisers at her and her second husband's sixteen-seat dining room table.

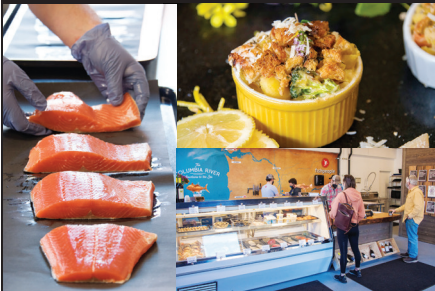
Eager for a smaller town and with her "third-and-final" husband, Stu, she took a mid-life leap and bought her own restaurant, scrubbing the demons from a crepey kitchen in Bingen and naming it after the wind. But she couldn't avoid the many pitfalls of restaurant life. Regardless of her charm and maternal touch, Watson couldn't soften the underlying, often misogynistic kitchen culture, what she calls in her memoir, the "pirate society."

Mitch Banks was one of Watson's first hires at Viento. Newly arrived from North Carolina, Banks was a carpenter with a seasoned background in high-production kitchens.



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Guests gather around the fire before dinner at the Ruby June Inn.



“I came from that pirate world,” he recalls. “I loved Kathy’s plan to change the menu every season. She’d just make things happen by sheer effort and will. But if she wanted to succeed, I knew she had to come around to some of that harder edge.”

By her final three years at Nora’s Table, Watson found her groove, excising the bad seeds from the kitchen and surrounding herself with stable competence, including Ricardo Lopez, aka Cuate, (owner of El Cuate Mexican restaurant in Hood River) who started as a dishwasher at Nora’s and quickly worked his way up the chain.

She’d arrived as close to restaurant nirvana as possible, sharing with her community a menu both satisfying and surprising. But she paid a hefty toll to get there, and Watson simply needed the race to end. With the Chef’s Collective she’s created a space for younger chefs like Livingston, and a few seasoned, non-traditional chefs like Jon Moch (who runs Hood River’s pop-up ramen shop) and John Helleberg, former chef-owner of the shuttered Sophie’s.

“I really love feeding people,” she says. “That’s just elemental to who I am.”

David Hanson is a writer, photographer and video producer based in Hood River. Find his editorial and commercial work at ModocStores.com and weddings at CascadiaStudios.com.



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