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CHECK IN

From its design elements to its history, Shelter Harbor Inn is full of surprises

Yep, there's free candy in an inn owned by a dentist.

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright Globe Correspondent. Updated October 21, 2020, 12:37 p.m.



The 220-year-old Shelter Harbor Inn was once a favorite stop of opera singers en route from New York to Boston. DIANE BAIR

WESTERLY, R.I. — “A dentist walks into an inn” might sound like the beginning of a joke. Not in this case. Here, the Rhode Island dentist in question, Dennis Flanagan, bought the 23-room inn (how that happened is a long story) last October. With no experience in innkeeping, Flanagan enlisted his grown children to help. “Since we’re so small, it’s all hands on deck here,” says daughter Kellyn Rivero, who handles events and weddings. That means there’s complimentary candy in glass cases in the hallway, thanks to daughter and interior designer Blake Maroon, mother of three kids. Yep, there’s free candy in an inn owned by a dentist.

These days, the Shelter Harbor Inn has a lively, family-friendly vibe, as evidenced by the kids playing on a wooden swing while their parents finish lunch on the nearby patio. But that doesn’t mean vinyl tablecloths and kid-proof furnishings. That just wouldn’t do for a 220-year-old farmhouse-turned-inn that was once a hideaway for opera singers en route to Boston from New York. To amp up the style, Maroon worked with Randolph Duke, an LA interior- and clothing designer who outfits the likes of actor Laura Linney and singer Mary J. Blige. Maroon added her own touches, and the result is a delightful mix of African art, contemporary fine-art photography by Rhode Islander Noelle Wolcin, and an eclectic mix of old and new furnishings, set amid the building’s 1800s architectural features — including a massive stone fireplace in the lobby. Guest rooms are located in the main inn, in the carriage house, and in a renovated barn on the three-acre property. Some guest rooms have decks, and some have gas fireplaces.

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In a nod to the inn’s musical history, they’ve named guest rooms after composers, and host live music performances during dinner on occasional weekends. More events are forthcoming, including a Christmas cookie decorating (with an appearance by Santa) on Dec. 19. “I love events, and I love getting people out of the deep, dark hole of the pandemic,” Rivero says. These days, social events are limited to 50 people inside and 100 people outdoors.

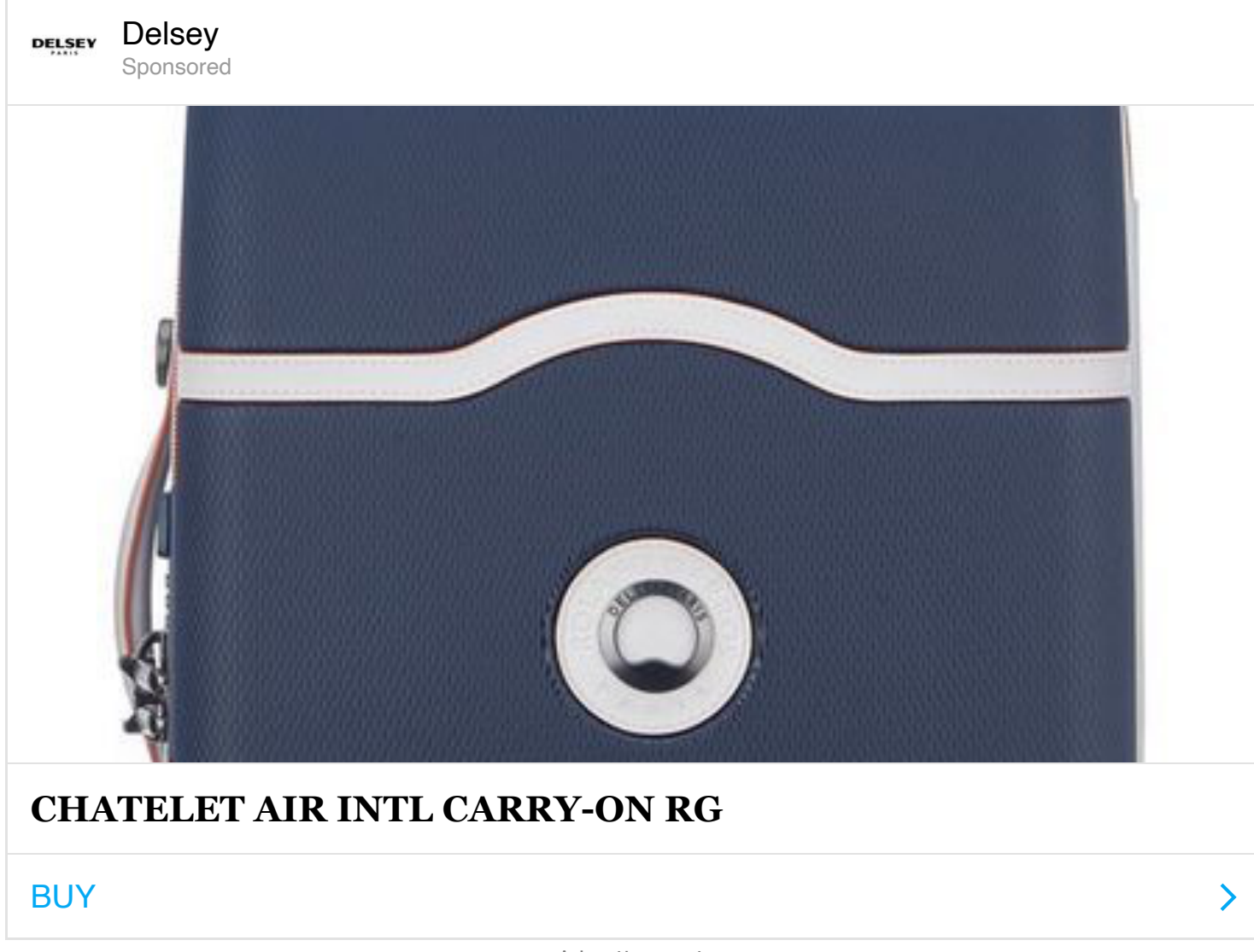
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Speaking of which, COVID-19 has affected everyone in the hospitality business, and the Shelter Harbor Inn is no exception. Its Conservatory and dining room bars are closed, and 90 percent of its dining tables are situated outdoors, spaced at least 8 feet apart. No more than eight guests are permitted to sit at a single table, and of course the inn follows all the guidelines set by the Rhode Island Department of Health. Menus are disposable.



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All of this hasn’t stopped the inn from hosting small weddings (owner Dennis Flanagan is credentialed to officiate) and from attracting as many guests as it can handle since re-opening in late May (after closing during the winter because of the pandemic). Many of them are couples and families looking for a nearby escape from Boston and New York. This small, homey inn (with some adjoining rooms for families) ticks lots of boxes, with its open space (a large lawn and plantings, including an herb garden), the private Shelter Harbor beach (six minutes away), and local places to play, like Burlingame State Park, Ninigret Wildlife Refuge, and Misquamicut Beach. The inn offers complimentary use of bicycles, and there’s a small spa on site, offering massages and facials. The hot tub on the third floor deck probably won’t re-open, and that space will likely be reimagined — although the Flanagans don’t all agree on the fate of the hot tub.

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People from North Carolina love the blackened shrimp and grits served at the Shelter Harbor Inn. That qualifies as street cred. DIANE BAIR

What they do agree on: It’s been a wild ride so far — more work and more fun than they could’ve imagined. “My quality of life has gone up dramatically,” says Flanagan, who still works in the dental field while running the inn. He’s especially proud of the inn’s culinary side, helmed by executive chef Jason MacDonald. The inn serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner, using local vendors as much as possible. Of course, it offers Narragansett Beer in the bar, and Westerly’s own Grey Sail brews. No johnnycakes on the menu, but it does make another Ocean State standard: stuffles. Served as a small plate, these cherrystone clams are stuffed with Andouille sausage, peppers, clam meat, and fresh herbs, finished with a lemon beurre blanc. Currently, you can get lobster salad and lobster rolls — the latter offered Rhode Island style (chilled meat) or Connecticut style (warm with butter). Flatbread pizza and seafood are among the top choices at lunchtime.

Surprisingly, though, the best seller on the dinner menu isn’t New England-influence at all. It’s blackened shrimp and grits, a gooey, spicy medley of creamy grits studded with succulent shrimp, pancetta, and cremini mushrooms (\$23). This dish is so good, “We have people come up from North Carolina, and they absolutely love our shrimp and grits,” Flanagan says.

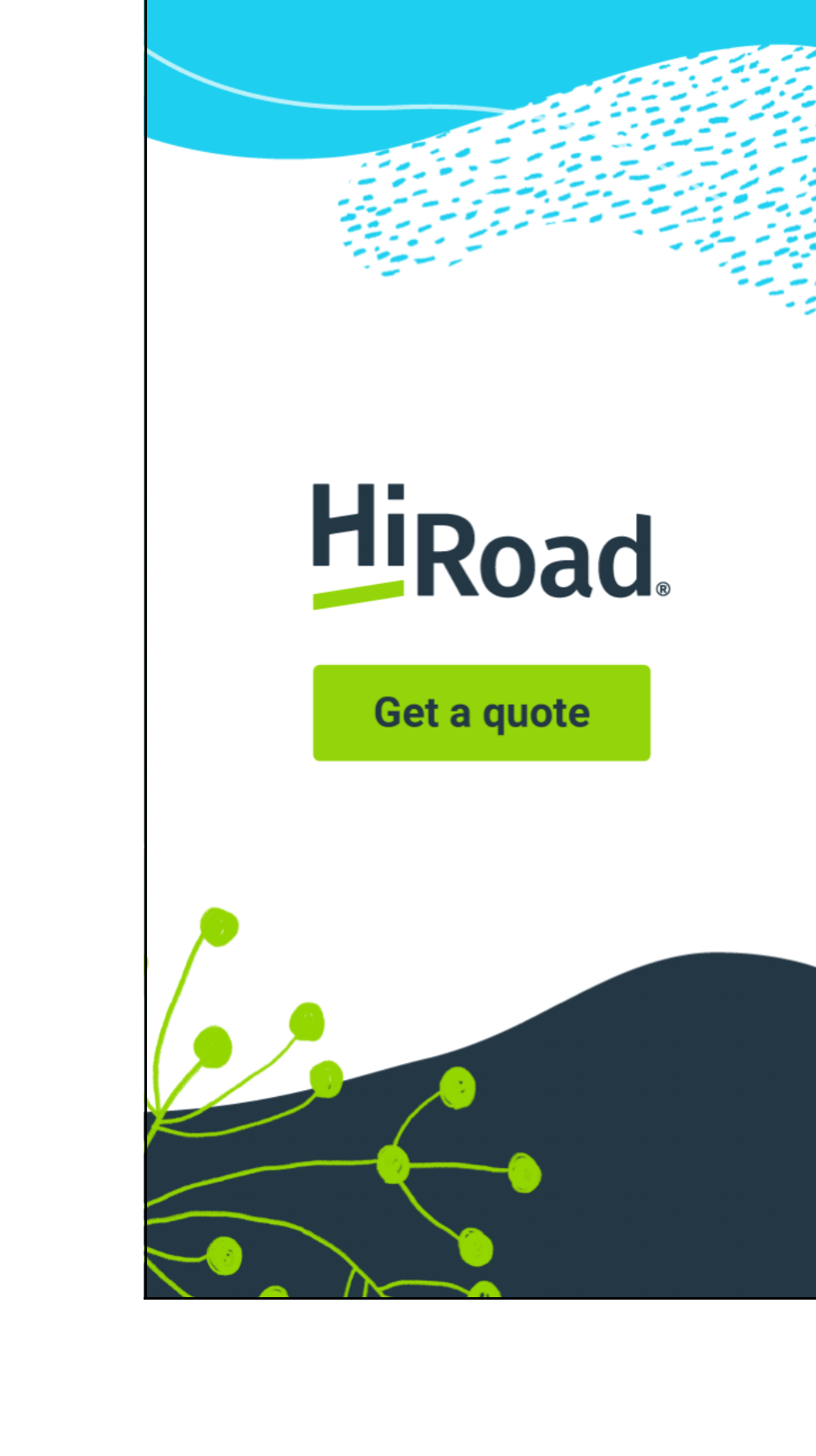
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And it sure pairs well with a ‘Gansett.

Shelter Harbor Inn, 10 Wagner Road, Westerly, R.I.; 401-322-8883. www.shelterharborinnri.com. Open year-round. Rooms from \$139 weekdays; from \$159 on weekends.

Diane Bair and Pamela Wright can be reached at bairwright@gmail.com

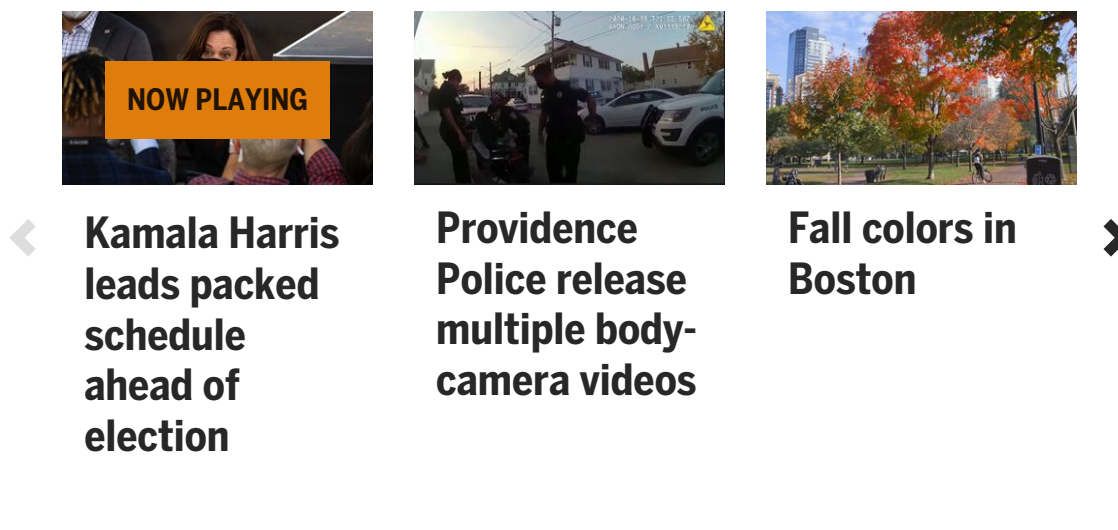
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