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RI FOOD & DINING

Ocean House's Chef Will Rietzel aims to 'compose a symphony' on your dinner plate

The famed chef talks about his journey from dishwasher to James Beard semifinalist, his thought process in the kitchen, and more

By **Lauren Daley** Globe Correspondent, Updated June 13, 2022, 12:19 p.m.

Chef Will Rietzel, the chef de cuisine at COAST, a fine dining establishment at the Ocean House in Westerly, Rhode Island. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Perhaps it was fate that brought a 14-year-old Will Rietzel to North Kingstown's Junction Pizzeria circa 2005.

For his first job, he applied as a dishwasher. And he fell in love with it.

"I had such a great team starting out, great mentors. If I didn't have that, it might have gone in a completely different direction," said the North Kingstown native, now 31.

The pizza joint set Rietzel on a life trajectory. He realized he had an appreciation for food and the restaurant industry's culture. He worked his way up from prep cook making pizzas to running the restaurant as a manager by 18.

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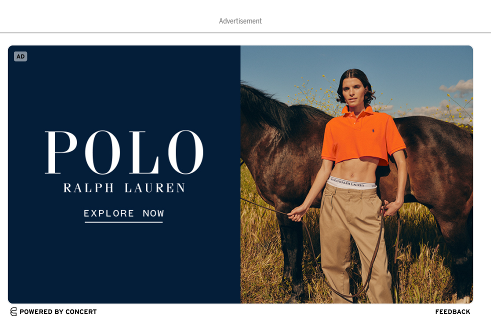

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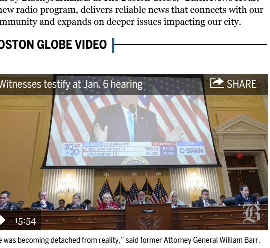

"He was becoming detached from reality," said former Attorney General William Barr.
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Today, Rietzel is chef de cuisine at COAST — a Forbes five-star restaurant at the luxe Ocean House. The Relais & Châteaux property in Watch Hill is also a Forbes five-star rated hotel. Rietzel was the only Rhode Island semifinalist for the 2022 James Beard Award in the "Best Chef in the Northeast" category.

At COAST, Rietzel oversees daily operations, and creates seasonal four-course prix fixe menus — one "savory," one vegetarian menu. His current savory menu starts with Maine diver scallop crudo with strawberry, finger lime, citrus tea, sea bean; followed by local lobster, or a foie gras mousse with moondrop grape, almond, Minus 8 Vinegar, brioche.

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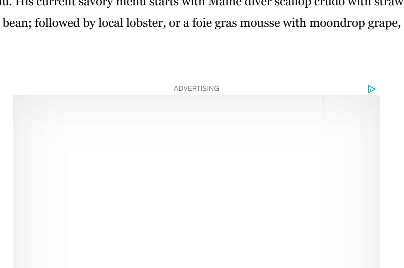
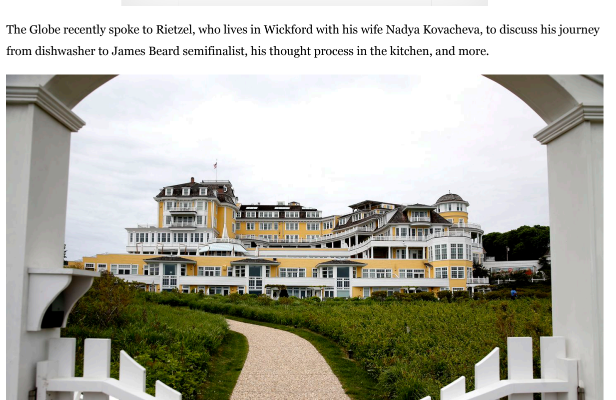


The Globe recently spoke to Rietzel, who lives in Wickford with his wife Nadya Kovacheva, to discuss his journey from dishwasher to James Beard semifinalist, his thought process in the kitchen, and more.


The exterior of the Ocean House in Westerly, Rhode Island. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Q: You were nominated as a James Beard semifinalist. How did that feel?

Rietzel: Pretty amazing. After years of hard work, to see that come to fruition was just incredible.

Was it a long-time goal?

Not so much, but it's been in the back of my mind. Over the past few years, we've been trying to get more involved with the James Beard Foundation. I was coming up on three years running the fine dining restaurant, which is the minimum required, so we thought we'd throw my name in the hat and see what happened.

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I think what we do at Ocean House, and COAST specifically, is truly remarkable for the New England area. Being outside New York City and still being able to do similar-style food, quality of service, and our wine program, is something I feel we should be recognized for. ... I think fine dining is becoming a fad of the past. More casual spots are popping up — accessible, high-volume places. We're sticking true to values of excellent service, excellent food, and a memorable experience.

You started at Junction Pizzeria. Did you know then you wanted a career in culinary?

I knew I wanted to continue on that path. I was looking at culinary schools, and the owner of the restaurant at the time thought I already had a pretty far-enough-along foundation that culinary school would've been repetitive for me. I ended up going to CCRI for business management and accounting. I moved on to Bistro 9 in East Greenwich (now permanently closed) during college. It was a step toward fine dining, a white tablecloth Italian restaurant. That was eye-opening — more composed dishes, complex combinations of ingredients I'd never seen before.

I was fully consumed, started working 80- to 90-hour weeks. I loved the chef I worked for, Aaron Edwards. Every second I wasn't cooking, I was studying food, reading books. He gave me a lot of creativity and it opened my mind.

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When I left, I dove into my first true fine dining restaurant in Newport, Tucker's Bistro — a classic French Bistro, like you're walking into 1950s Paris in terms of decor, cuisine, and ambiance. (Tucker's is also now permanently closed.)

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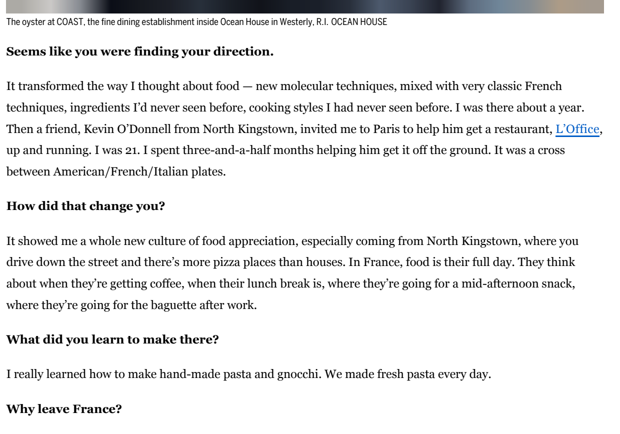
The oyster at COAST, the fine dining establishment inside Ocean House in Westerly, R.I. OCEAN HOUSE

Seems like you were finding your direction.

It transformed the way I thought about food — new molecular techniques, mixed with very classic French techniques, ingredients I'd never seen before, cooking styles I had never seen before. I was there about a year. Then a friend, Kevin O'Donnell from North Kingstown, invited me to Paris to help him get a restaurant, L'Office, up and running. I was 21. I spent three-and-a-half months helping him get it off the ground. It was a cross between American/French/Italian plates.

How did that change you?

It showed me a whole new culture of food appreciation, especially coming from North Kingstown, where you drive down the street and there's more pizza places than houses. In France, food is their full day. They think about when they're getting coffee, when their lunch break is, where they're going for a mid-afternoon snack, where they're going for the baguette after work.

What did you learn to make there?

I really learned how to make hand-made pasta and gnocchi. We made fresh pasta every day.

Why leave France?

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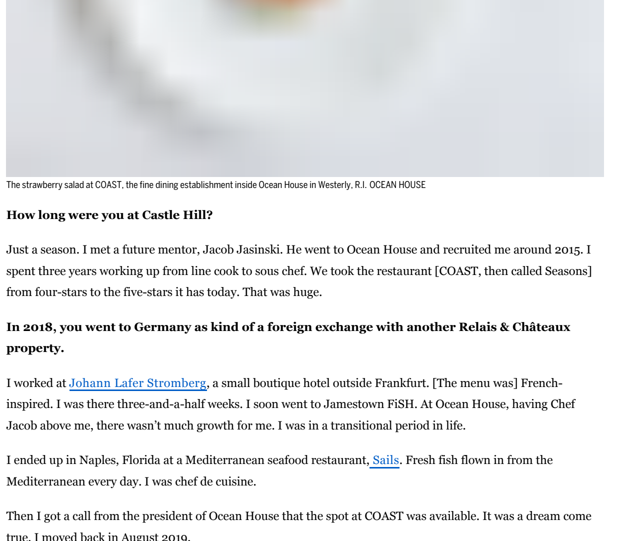
Visa issues. I went to Castle Hill in Newport. Very similar to Ocean House, a Relais & Châteaux property, Forbes four-star property. That reaffirmed the direction I wanted to go. I love the precision and technical execution, being forced to slow down and examine every single thing you do versus going through the motions.

I love creating not only delicious dishes, but beautiful works of art, and composing a symphony of courses that each on their own might seem small or simple, but coming together, makes a memorable experience.


The strawberry salad at COAST, the fine dining establishment inside Ocean House in Westerly, R.I. OCEAN HOUSE

How long were you at Castle Hill?

Just a season. I met a future mentor, Jacob Jasinski. He went to Ocean House and recruited me around 2015. I spent three years working up from line cook to sous chef. We took the restaurant [COAST, then called Seasons] from four-stars to the five-stars it has today. That was huge.

In 2018, you went to Germany as kind of a foreign exchange with another Relais & Châteaux property.

I worked at Johann Lafer Stromberg, a small boutique hotel outside Frankfurt. [The menu was] French-inspired. I was there three-and-a-half weeks. I soon went to Jamestown FiSH. At Ocean House, having Chef Jacob above me, there wasn't much growth for me. I was in a transitional period in life.

I ended up in Naples, Florida at a Mediterranean seafood restaurant, Sails. Fresh fish flown in from the Mediterranean every day. I was chef de cuisine.

Then I got a call from the president of Ocean House that the spot at COAST was available. It was a dream come true. I moved back in August 2019.

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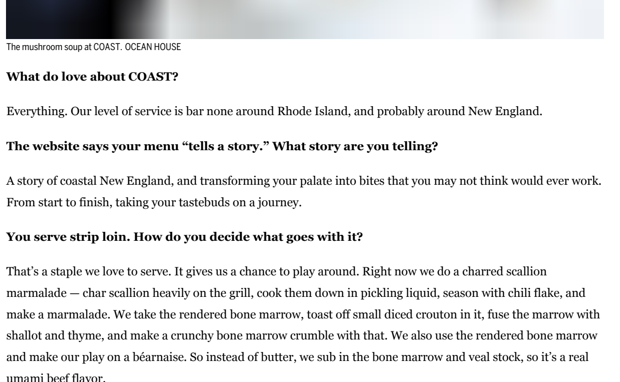

The mushroom soup at COAST. OCEAN HOUSE

What do love about COAST?

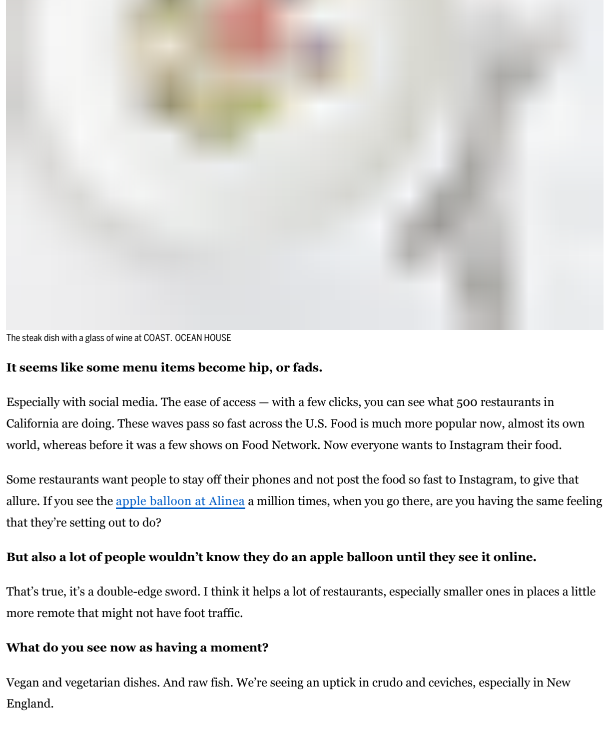
Everything. Our level of service is bar none around Rhode Island, and probably around New England.

The website says your menu "tells a story." What story are you telling?

A story of coastal New England, and transforming your palate into bites that you may not think would ever work. From start to finish, taking your tastebuds on a journey.

You serve strip loin. How do you decide what goes with it?

That's a staple we love to serve. It gives us a chance to play around. Right now we do a charred scallion marmalade — char scallion heavily on the grill, cook them down in pickling liquid, season with chili flake, and make a marmalade. We take the rendered bone marrow, toast off small diced crouton in it, fuse the marrow with shallot and thyme, and make a crunchy bone marrow crumble with that. We also use the rendered bone marrow and make our play on a béarnaise. So instead of butter, we sub in the bone marrow and veal stock, so it's a real umami beef flavor.


The steak dish with a glass of wine at COAST. OCEAN HOUSE

It seems like some menu items become hip, or fads.

Especially with social media. The ease of access — with a few clicks, you can see what 500 restaurants in California are doing. These waves pass so fast across the U.S. Food is much more popular now, almost its own world, whereas before it was a few shows on Food Network. Now everyone wants to Instagram their food.

Some restaurants want people to stay off their phones and not post the food so fast to Instagram, to give that allure. If you see the apple balloon at Alinea a million times, when you go there, are you having the same feeling that they're setting out to do?

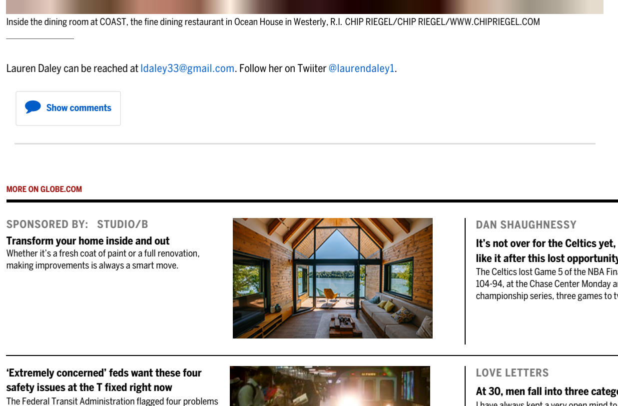
But also a lot of people wouldn't know they do an apple balloon until they see it online.

That's true, it's a double-edge sword. I think it helps a lot of restaurants, especially smaller ones in places a little more remote that might not have foot traffic.

What do you see now as having a moment?

Vegan and vegetarian dishes. And raw fish. We're seeing an uptick in crudo and ceviches, especially in New England.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.


Inside the dining room at COAST, the fine dining restaurant in Ocean House in Westerly, R.I. CHIP RIEGEL/CHIP RIEGEL/WWW.CHIPRIEGEL.COM

Lauren Daley can be reached at ldaley33@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter @laurendaley1.

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DAN SHAUGHNESSY
It's not over for the Celtics yet, but it sure feels like it after this lost opportunity
The Celtics lost Game 5 of the NBA Finals to the Warriors, 104-94, at the Chase Center Monday and trail this championship series, three games to two.

'Extremely concerned' feds want these four safety issues at the T fixed right now
The Federal Transit Administration flagged four problems it wants the MBTA to address immediately, the T's safety chief told board members Monday.

LOVE LETTERS
At 30, men fall into three categories
I have always kept a very open mind to dating around age, race/ethnicity, professional background, geographic distance, etc., but I sense that I might just be better off taking a break from dating for a few years and picking up again in my mid-30s.

Two more Massachusetts men test positive for monkeypox virus
Two more Massachusetts men have tested positive for the monkeypox virus, nearly a month after the state's first case of the virus was reported amid an international outbreak, the Department of Public Health said Sunday. The tests came back positive on Saturday.

ON BASKETBALL
The Celtics reverted back to their worst selves on the biggest stage, and there's no room for error or excuses now
The Celtics approached the biggest game of their careers as if it were a preseason scrimmage, and allowed the Golden State Warriors to impose their will in Game 5.

RED SOX
Top Red Sox prospect Marcelo Mayer is tearing up the minors and drawing rave reviews
"From what I've seen, he's going to be a superstar," said Salem hitting coach Nelson Paulino of the shortstop, who was a first-round draft pick in 2021.

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