

RI FOOD & DINING

For the love of butter: Chef Jeanie Roland on pushing the culinary boundaries in a small New England town

Roland, who owns Ella's in Westerly, R.I., and another restaurant in Florida, is a seven-time James Beard award nominee who beat celebrity chef Bobby Flay at his own game.

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 15, 2022, 6:00 a.m.



For the last 10 years, Ella's in Westerly, Rhode Island, has pushed the boundaries of culinary innovation, and how French technique and Asian ingredients are supposed to work together. Chef Jeanie Roland, a seven-time James Beard nominated chef and owner, has just released her second book which talks about home cooking, her activist mom in the 1960s, and her two restaurants. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

WESTERLY, R.I. — While working a miserable job she reluctantly earned her degree in, Jeanie Roland pleaded to her parents to allow her switch gears and attend cooking school. Her father, from her childhood home in Waterbury, Connecticut, discouraged her and asked her why she would ever want to do that.

It really shouldn't have been a surprise.

As a child, she mimicked her mother in the kitchen, setting the table each night, and sneaking pieces of crisp skin off the family's roast every week. She would bring packed

lunches to school that certainly weren't what the other kids at the table were eating: tongue, bluefish, and cheap cuts of meat like liverwurst sandwiches with dollops of mayonnaise. She'd devour the vegetables she wouldn't normally eat at home when her grandmother cooked them in duck or bacon fat.

As a teenager, she would fry canned mushrooms "in a ton of butter" as a snack. She forced the family to try every rendition of her bagels until she crafted the perfect recipe. Her father would come home from work with handmade pasta drying on broomsticks in the dining room.

But her father, she said, figured she would have a hard life as a *woman* chef.

Yet, he caved. And she applied to The Culinary Institute of America and was accepted in 1990.

It's been a long road, but today, Roland is a seven-time James Beard award nominee and owns [Ella's Food & Drink](#) in Westerly and [The Perfect Caper](#), a popular restaurant that has won numerous awards in Punta Gorda, Florida. In 2015, she competed and won in Food Network's '[Beat Bobby Flay](#)' cooking show. At the time, she was only one of three chefs who defeated celebrity chef. She has recently published two cookbooks, [one](#) named after her restaurant in the South, and "[Butter, Love & Cream.](#)"

The Globe recently spoke to Roland about running two restaurants on either side of the eastern sea border.

Why didn't your Dad want you to become a chef?

Roland: We're talking about a girl — not even a woman yet at that time — working in

the kitchen in the 1980s and early '90s. There was a lot of big-man mentality and a lot of vulgarity in the kitchens where I was washing dishes. Even in the '90s, I had guys grab their genitals and put them in my face while I was squatting down to get something out of a drawer. There were times where it would get scary.

And now you run your own restaurants.

Down in Florida, I have a lot of young women, right out of culinary [school], that do consider me a mentor. I run my restaurant knowing that we are all human and know we make mistakes. I'm not infallible either. But it's about how you recover from them, especially in our industry. Ego should not get in the way.

For example, someone could say they don't like a dish and that it needs something. Some chefs don't get that, and I think of that as a male-ego thing. But girls accept criticism a lot easier.



The Filet Maison with Lobster Mac & Cheese. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

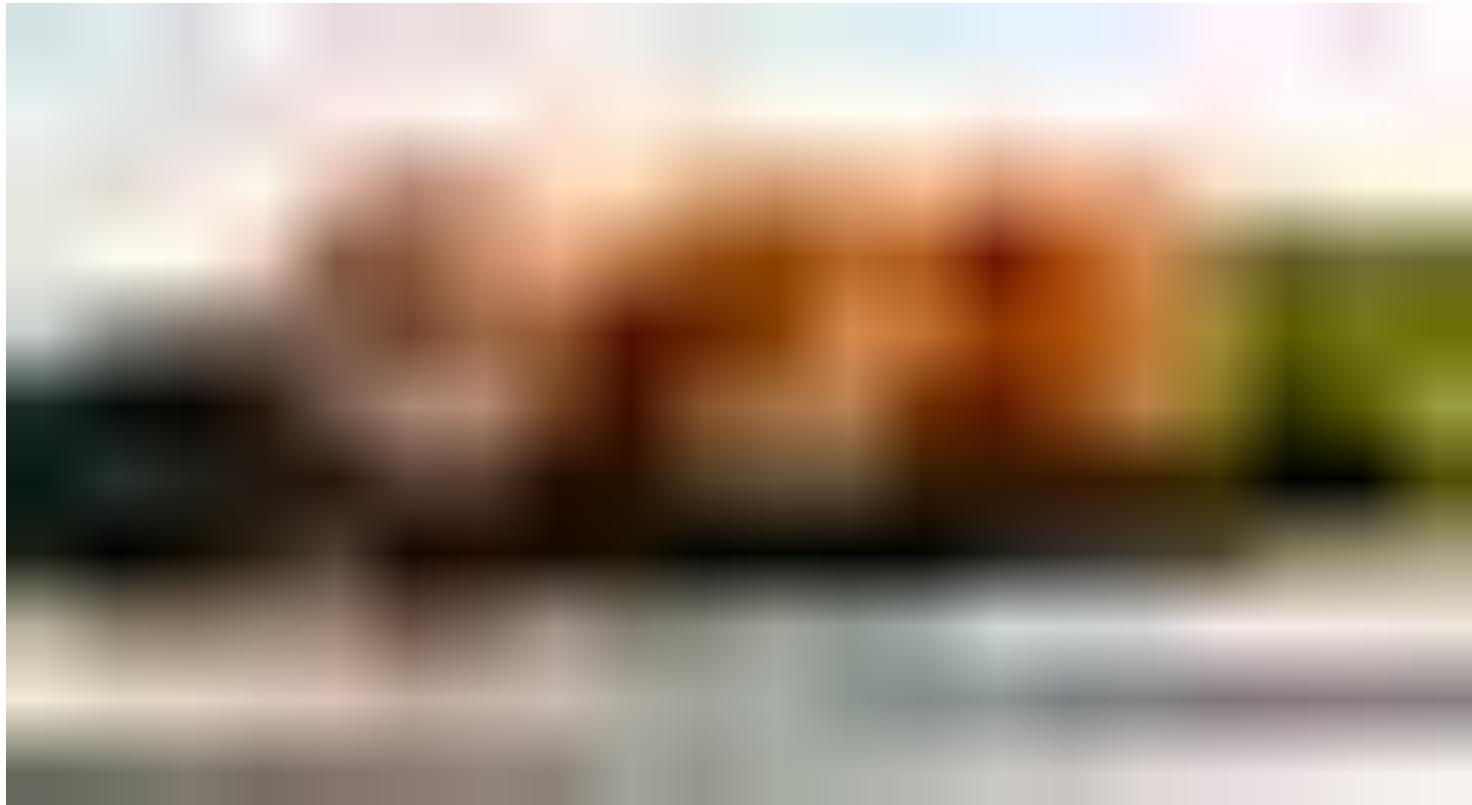
What's the difference, to you, between being a woman chef and a male chef in today's industry?

I tell all the women in my kitchen under me: We have to do everything and do it twice as good as everyone else to make it, sadly. You have to act tough, have thick skin, no crying when you cut off your finger, and be extra careful how we act. Nobody will respect you, unfortunately, if don't do that.

To this day, for example, I was washing dishes on my birthday. That's how you run a restaurant. You do everything there is to do and you know you have to do to be better. If you can't, you won't be successful.

What are the differences between your restaurants?

My menu at the Perfect Caper usually has like 20 different entrées on it — which is really aggressive — but I feel it's what made me into the powerhouse I am down there. I've never done such a broad menu at Ella's, but because it's our anniversary [10 years at Ella's this year], I've been adding similar menu items at both places.



Crabby Scallops at Ella's in Westerly. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

If someone goes to Ella's this summer, what do you think they should order?

I absolutely love cooking foie gras. I make a club with a seared Hudson Valley foie gras with tomato apple jam, crisp smoked bacon on grilled brioche. My chopped salad is made with a caper-whole grain mustard vinaigrette. And it's just really good.

I am known to cook duck. A lot of people don't like duck because it's not always

prepared correctly. But I only get from [D'Artagnan](#) [which sources from small family farms and is fully organic]. You can taste the difference. I have duck udon, duck a deaux facons [which is a crispy confit of duck and garlic-marinated duck breast, wilted greens, mashed potatoes, a lentil-pancetta vinaigrette, and thyme jus], and duck frites [duck-fat frites is one of the things she cooked to beat Bobby Flay].

The crabby scallop is kind of this invention of my own. It's crab, grilled sea scallops, coconut black rice with some really tiny Shanghai Bok Choy. It really shows my cooking style and has been on the menu since day one.

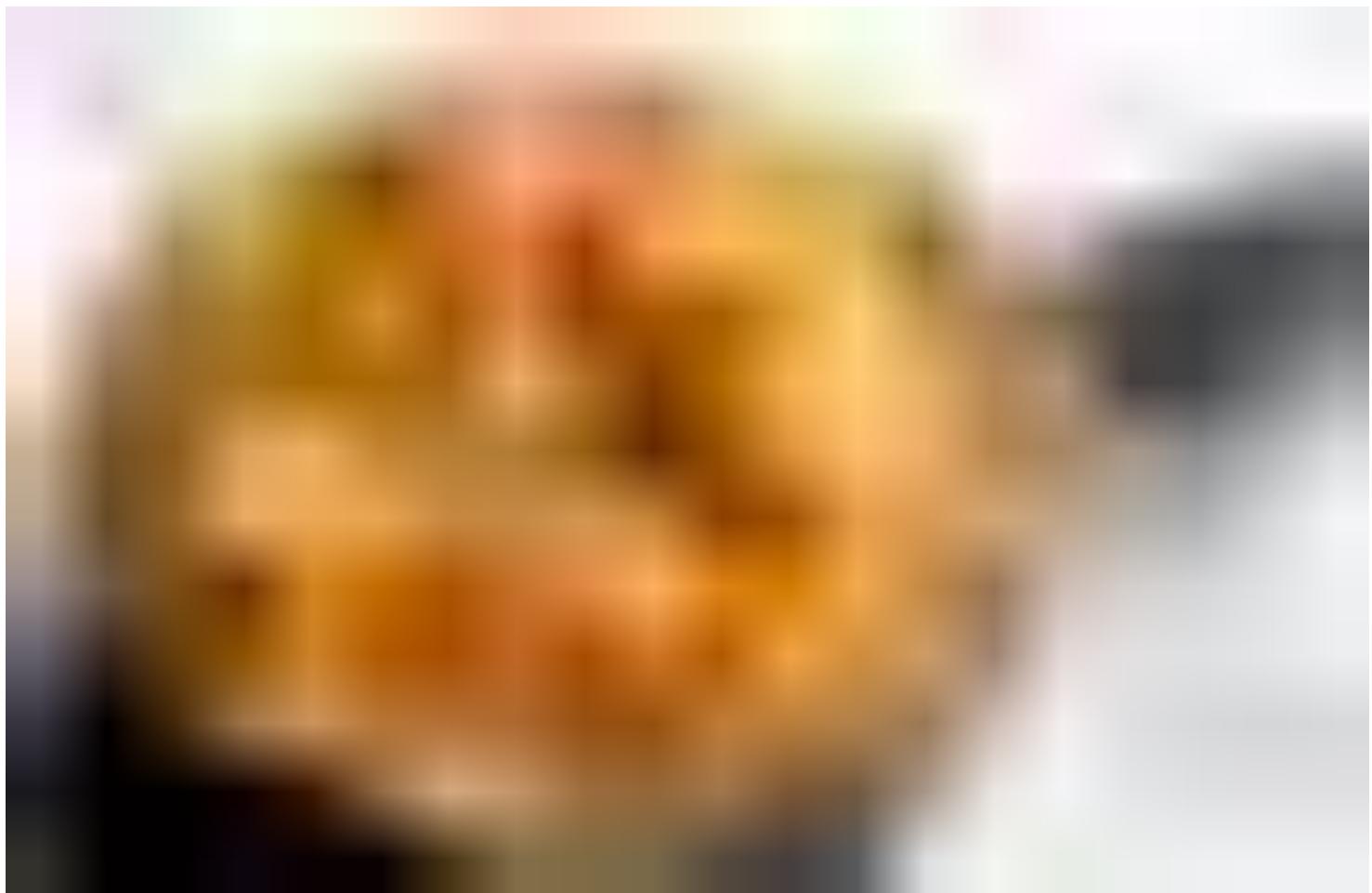
How would you describe your cuisine?

I don't like to say I'm French-Asian. I'm very classical, but whimsical. I cook like I like to eat, but keep things interesting yet simple enough for people to understand.

But you do use some Asian ingredients with classic, French cooking techniques.

The duck udon at Ella's is actually a salmon udon at the Perfect Caper. That's just something I came up with. I'm a cookbook junkie, and we have so many cookbooks that my husband found at yard sales when we were living in California in the mid-1990s. Some of them are half in Chinese, which is what is awesome about them. For years, I'll keep working on the same dish before it's solid and I put it on my menu.

I'm still just as obsessed with butter and fat as I was when I was a kid. It's why I wrote a whole cookbook about it.



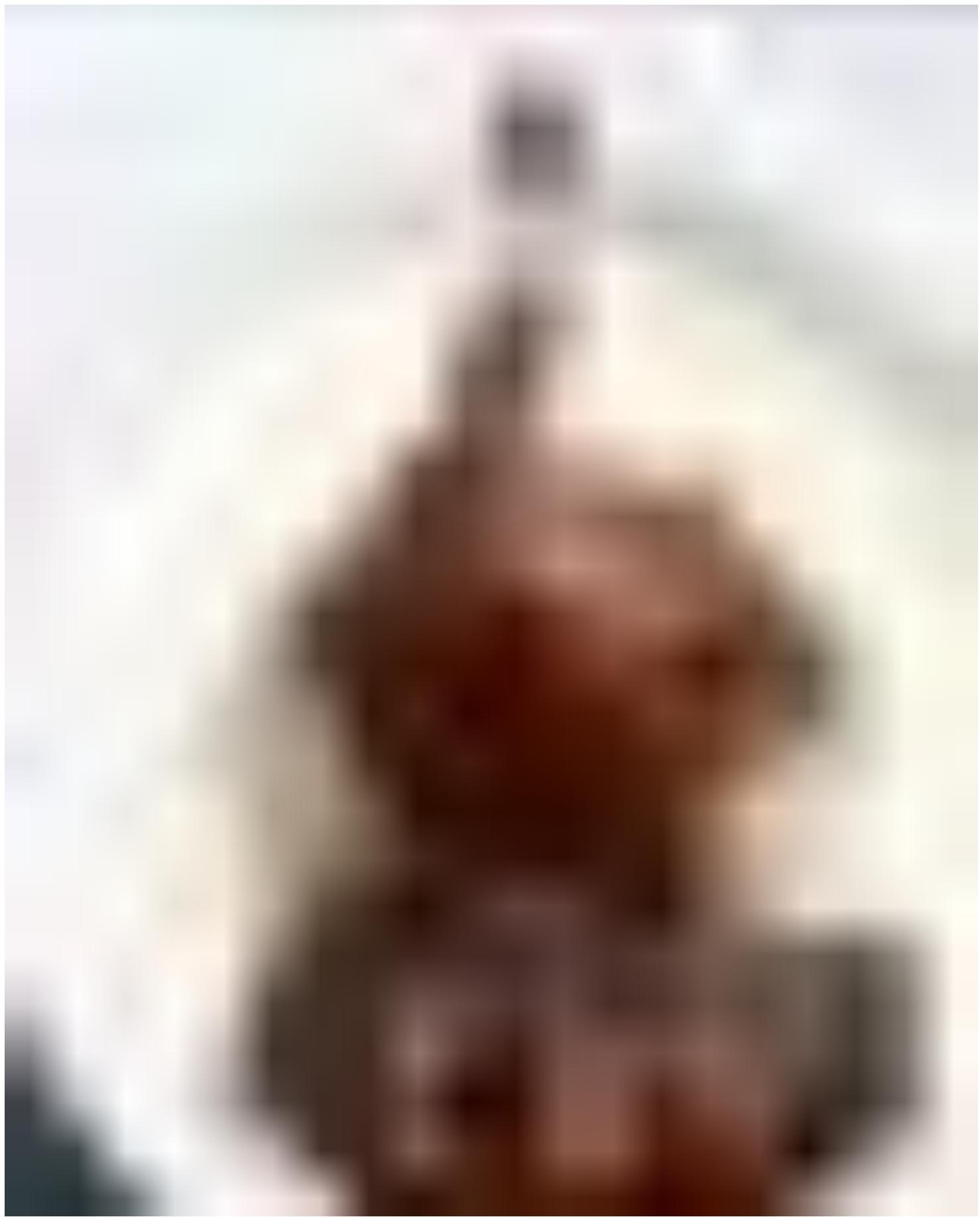
The Lobster Mac & Cheese side dish at Ella's in Westerly, Rhode Island. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

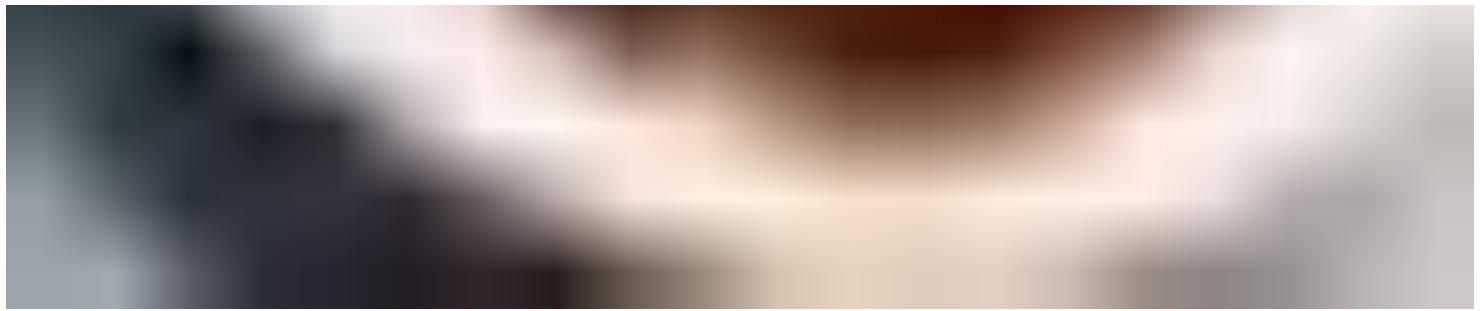
How long does it take for you to perfect a recipe?

I've had moments of brilliance where I just come up with things in my mind. Some happen in literally a couple of days, and some months. But I've kept all my notebooks throughout my career so I can look down at my ideas from 16 years ago.

How often are you going between restaurants?

I'm in Florida for over half the year. We never slow down. But we have about 230 seats and are always busy. If I doubled the size of my restaurant [in Florida], I could still fill it. We could never seat that capacity in Westerly.





The Duck A Deux Facons at Ella's in Westerly, Rhode Island. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Why is that?

We are really trying to promote ourselves and we [she and her husband, James, who is co-owner of both restaurants] are truly befuddled. We look at our place in Florida and they are scratching at the doors when we open and we just don't understand why no one notices us [in Westerly].

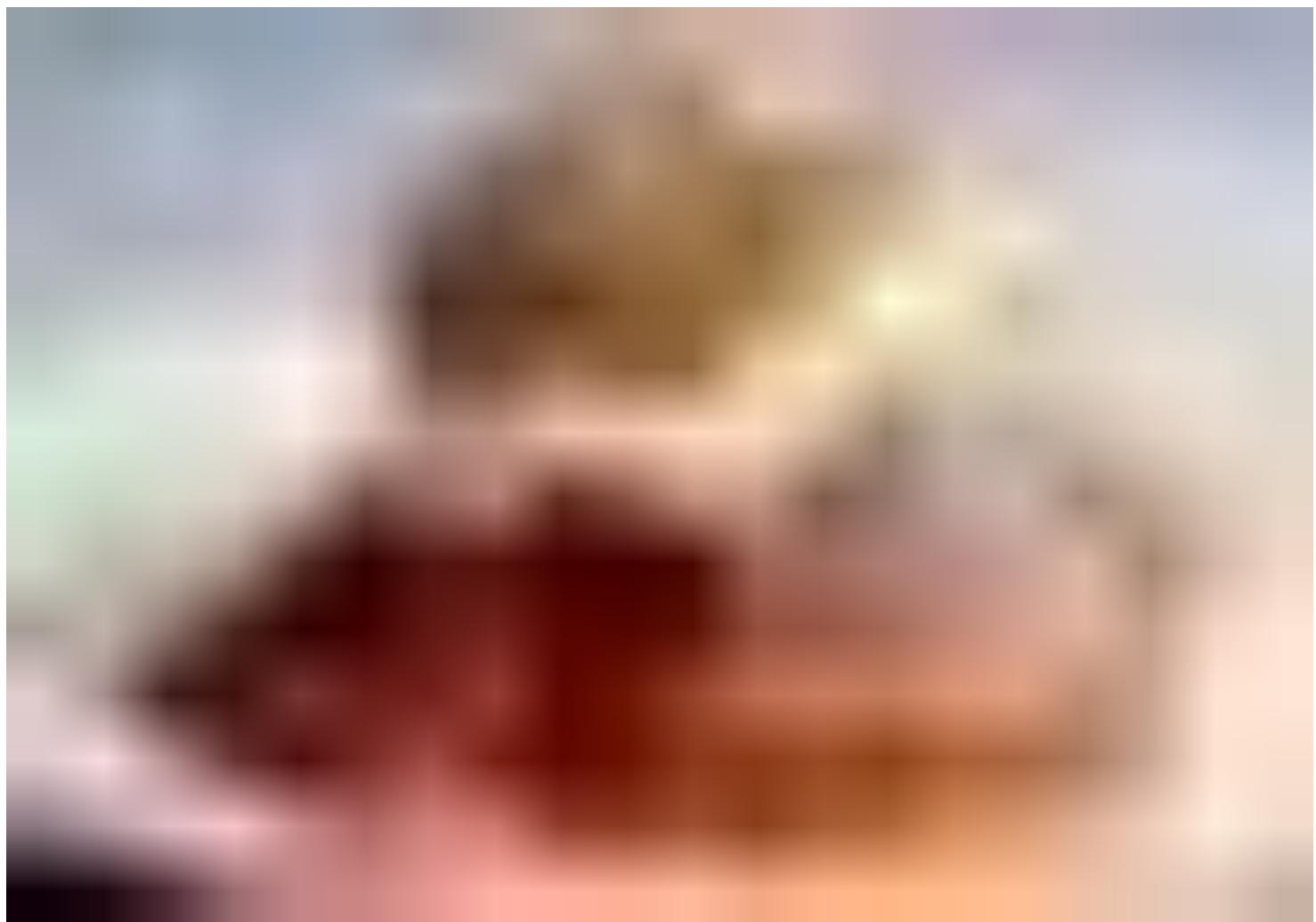
Why don't you think you're as busy in Westerly?

When we were starting out in Westerly, I think people were fixated on a couple of specific kinds of cuisines. When we popped up, many didn't understand us and would ask, 'Why can't you just do a normal sauce?' The town has progressed immensely as there's so many great new restaurants opening. But for so long, it was this local mentality of what their expectations were for us as a restaurant. If you don't conform, there's issues with that— just like in any small town. We had to even stop putting napkins on people's laps for them because they were offended by it. It's this strange expectation for us, but not other fine-dining establishments in Westerly — such as dining in the Ocean House.

Before we took over this space, there was an iconic Italian restaurant [Capizzanos] that was here for forever [Roland named Ella's after Eleanor, the mother who used to cook there]. Maybe they just felt like it was *the* Italian spot.

Are you serving any Rhode Island classics?

I don't want to sound silly because I bet every chef in Rhode Island says this but people need to try our calamari. I do it with sweet chili sauce, green onions, and toasted peanuts. It's a great way to get outside the box with a very traditional-to-Rhode Island dish that usually is fried with the peppers and has the tomato sauce [on the side].



Locally foraged strawberry shortcake from Ella's in Westerly, Rhode Island. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

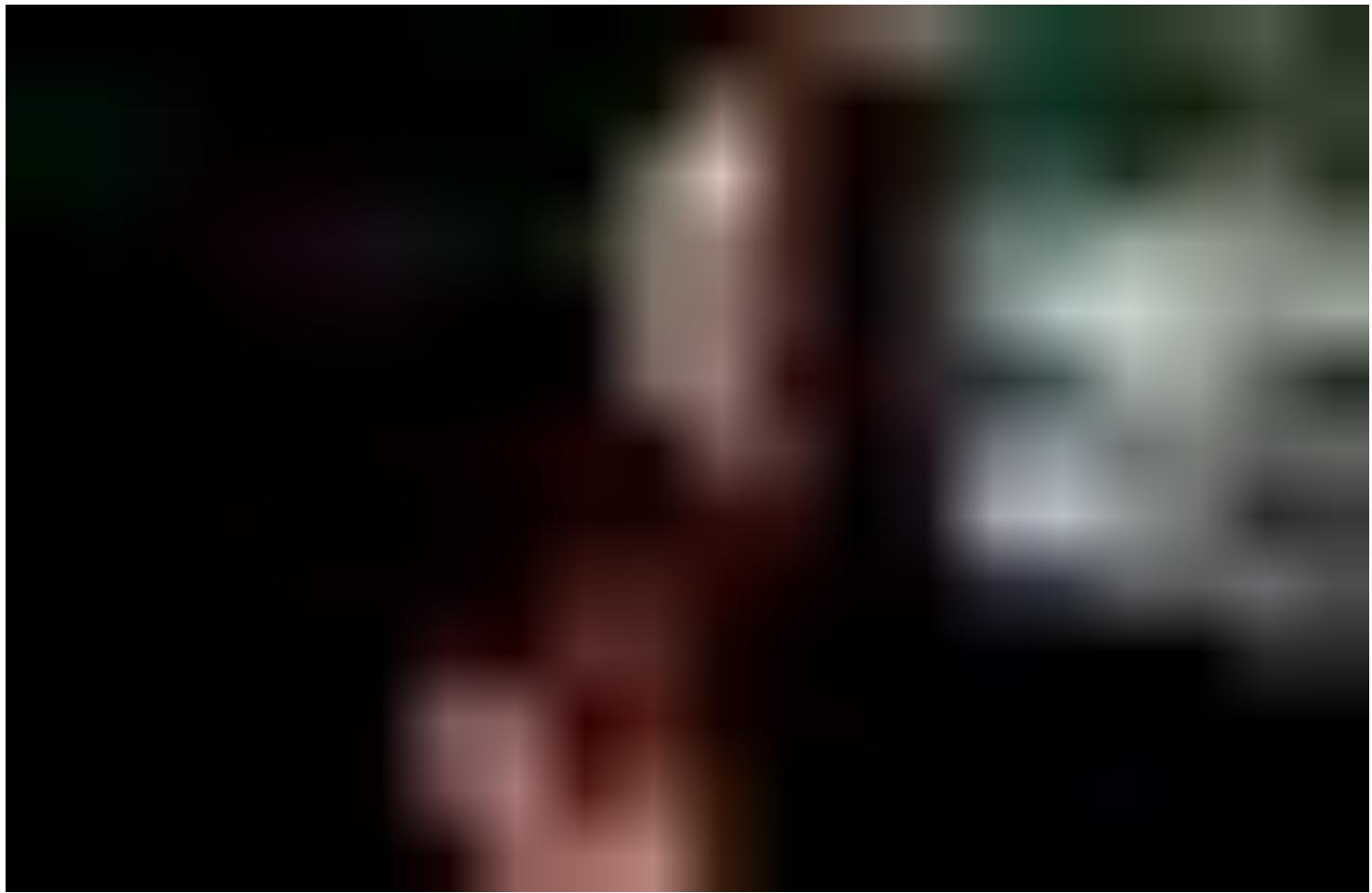
What do you think is changing the mentality in Westerly?

Transplants, yes. But also young people. And I think a lot of that is driven by social

media. Everyone pulls out their phone and posts pictures of their food on Instagram. Younger people are also destination traveling to eat. We have people who come to Ella's for a girl's bachelorette weekend and it's their big night out. We have a group from Boston that comes religiously every year.

Being in the industry, it was normal for me and my friends to go out and have a big dinner just because we loved trying new foods. But now, we're seeing a huge amount of young people doing that even when they aren't in the industry. This younger generations [of millennials and those of Gen Z] are also having children and I'm getting them hooked on things like lamb. That means I have a lifelong customer.

Ella's Food & Drink is located at 2 Tower St. in Westerly, Rhode Island. 401-315-0606. ellasfinefoodanddrink.com. Follow their [Instagram](#) for updates.



Ella's Food and Drink owner and chef Jeanie Roland. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

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