

Magic alive in postcard pretty town

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The Inn at Langley where Chef Matt Costello creates culinary extravaganzas for his ever-increasing fan club of fine food aficionados.

Photograph by: Michael McCarthy, PNG

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Special to the Province

Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a little town in rural America called Langley. This little town had a main street, with charming little shops operated by local artisans who sold products that were made locally. There was a little coffee shop where local folks went to chat, and a theatre, and up on the hill stood a wonderful inn where a famous chef did magical things to Penn Cove oysters and you could fall asleep in a gorgeous room to the sound of waves from the nearby ocean lapping against a beach underneath your window.

Yes, it sounds like a lovely fantasy of days long gone by, doesn't it? Except that it's all true. The chef is Matt Costello, and his Inn at Langley on Whidbey Island has been selected by

Conde Naste as one of the “top hotels in the world under \$300,” and the picture perfect little village is called Langley, one of the few remnants left of an old fashioned Norman Rockwell era in America where white picket fences surrounded generous green lawns fronting old Victorian houses and time stood still.

It's hard to believe that a postcard pretty little village like Langley still exists in this modern world of mega-malls, gigantic parking lots and 24-hour drive through fast food joints, but you can find this well-preserved memory of yesterday on the southern tip of Whidbey Island in the American San Juan Islands. It's only a leisurely three hour drive from Vancouver but really an entire world away, where the stars and stripes still sways atop the fire hall flag pole and friendly folks stop you in the street to say “howdy” and chat.

A few steps up from Langley's main street, where the Dog House Saloon nestles up to the town's chocolate shop right across from Mike's Café and next to a theatre showing first run movies, you'll find the gracious Inn at Langley hidden away behind a lush hedge and garden, overlooking Saratoga Passage, where on a good day gigantic gray whales drift by and where on weekends you can be served the feast of a lifetime by resident gastronomic genius Costello, who rules over his kitchen like a maestro presides over his orchestra, producing signature perfect meals to adoring aficionados of fine foods who venture here from all over the Pacific Northwest.

Here, in Costello's open kitchen where he effortlessly produces eight-course meals for the edification of customers who often reserve months in advance, you'll find the 100-mile diet reduced to the ten-mile dinner, for every morsel on the daily sheet is handpicked within close radius of the inn by Costello and his small crew of gastronomic elves. Cranberries? Foraged from the bog near the meadow. Fresh flowers? Picked at the farm down the road. Chanterelles come from the deep woods, venison from same, the mussels from nearby Penn Cove. Wine? From Washington State vintners. Even the table and chairs in Costello's dining room are hand crafted by local artisans in their home workshops just a short walk away.

Starting precisely at 7 pm, Costello enters the 35-seat room like a conductor facing his audience and proceeds to give a rundown on the evening's meal, which starts with an 'amuse bouche' and soon advances to an appetizer, followed by a salad and then a taster of soup, advancing steadily onwards in a rising crescendo towards the main entrée and slowly receding to a dessert and perhaps, finally, a cheese plate, all ingredients carefully matched to appropriate wines that descend to your table in a flight like crystal notes played by an angel on high.

After this heavenly culinary extravaganza, a brief amble to one's room at the Inn is the best that can be accomplished, where nature's own orchestra of wind and waves and a sunset

over Saratoga Passage completes the ideal evening of gustatory delights. For those whose budget does not include a night at The Inn at Langley, motels, bed and breakfasts and charming inns can be found both in lovely little Langley and all over the rustic south Whidbey Island region.

Rooms at the Inn (www.innatlangley.com) start at \$195. For more information about many wonderful local attractions on Whidbey Island log on to www.whidbeycamanoislands.com. For more Michael McCarthy travel stories log on to www.intentional-traveler.com.