

Robert Morris Inn

## Historic Eastern Shore restaurant, revived

**M**ost mornings, Mark Salter takes a ferry to work—crossing the Tred Avon River on a ferry line that's traveled the same route since 1683. Ten minutes after boarding, the British-born chef lands in the tiny town of Oxford, a stone's throw from the Robert Morris Inn, which he bought in 2010 after 17 years as the award-winning executive chef at the Inn at Perry Cabin in St. Michael's. And though he doesn't think of it this way, the trip is symbolic of what he believes in: making the most of local resources and respecting his surroundings.

Maryland crabs, Chesapeake Bay rockfish, local tomatoes, corn, peaches, squash—he transforms these ingredients into mouthwatering works of art that look almost too beautiful to eat.

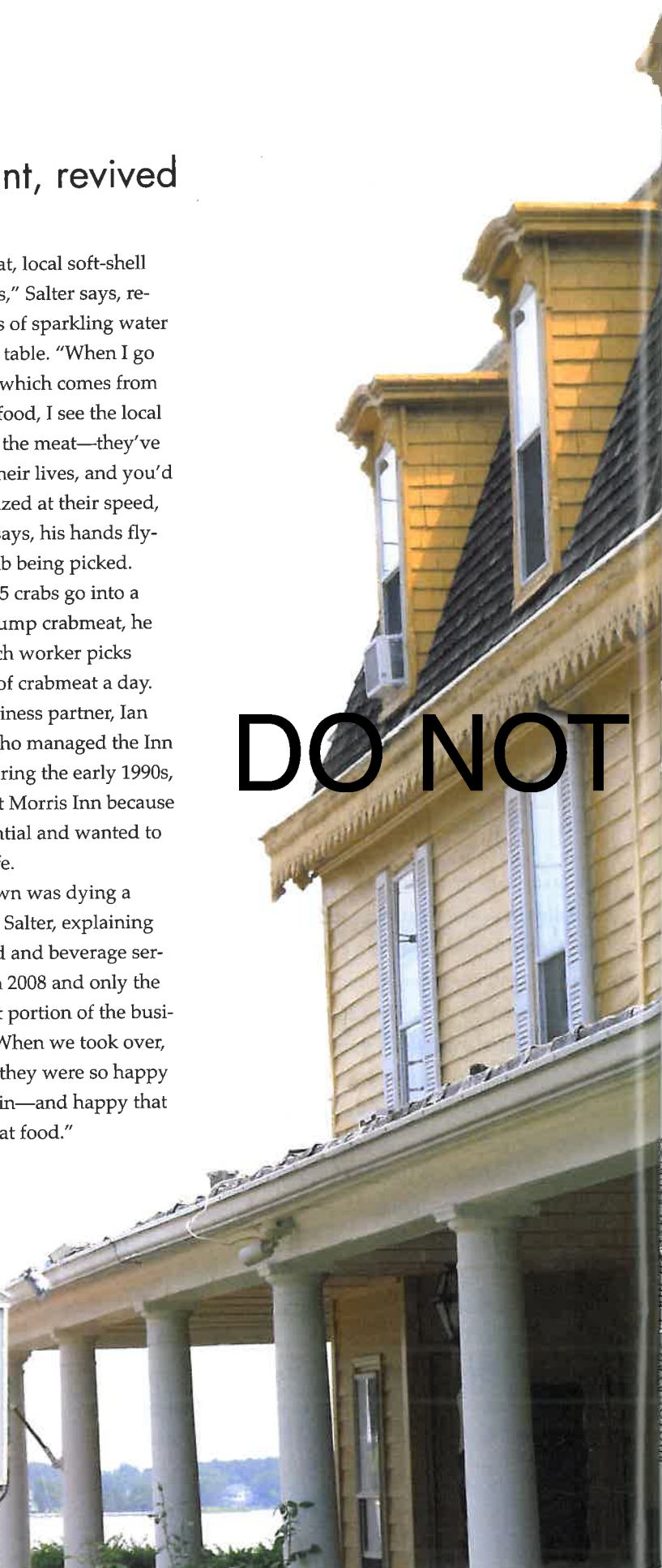
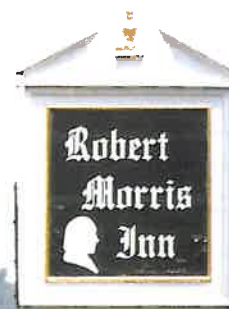
That's my dilemma when he serves me his signature crab cake one afternoon—a lightly browned disk of jumbo crabmeat on zigzag strips of yellow and green squash, drizzled with a white wine and lemon butter sauce and sprinkled with flash-fried threads of asparagus. After I admire it, I feel guilty about sticking my fork in. But the guilt evaporates when I taste the sweet lumps of crab with hints of lemon and tarragon.

"I really pride myself on serving

only local crabmeat, local soft-shell crabs, local oysters," Salter says, relaxing with a glass of sparkling water at a linen-covered table. "When I go get my crabmeat, which comes from Bay Hundred Seafood, I see the local ladies pulling out the meat—they've been doing it all their lives, and you'd be absolutely amazed at their speed, pfft pfft pfft," he says, his hands flying to mimic a crab being picked.

Probably 20 to 25 crabs go into a pound of jumbo lump crabmeat, he estimates, and each worker picks about 20 pounds of crabmeat a day. Salter and his business partner, Ian Fleming, a Scot who managed the Inn at Perry Cabin during the early 1990s, bought the Robert Morris Inn because they saw its potential and wanted to bring it back to life.

"This part of town was dying a slow death," says Salter, explaining that the inn's food and beverage service had closed in 2008 and only the bed and breakfast portion of the business remained. "When we took over, the locals told us they were so happy to see it open again—and happy that we're serving great food."



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The three-story inn, country yellow with white shutters and a shingled mansard roof, seats more than 80 people outside when the weather is nice—on the porch, brick verandah, and waterfront oyster shell patio. "The idea is that you can eat the same great food in whatever location suits you," Salter says. Inside the primary dining area, day or evening, is the wood-paneled Salter's Tap Room & Tavern, with two large brick fireplaces, leather-upholstered armchairs, polished wood tables, and cozy booths. It's said that author James Michener outlined his famous novel, "Chesapeake" here.

A more formal dining room, with chandeliers, window valances, and 140-year-old murals, is typically used for dinner and special functions. The colonial-blue Tred Avon Room, overlooking the river, is for private parties. As for lodging, the two upper levels house 16 guestrooms; the adjacent Bottle Cottage offers two waterfront rooms.

The inn's oldest section, dating to 1710, was a house built by ships' carpenters who installed hand-hewn beams and wooden pegged paneling. An English trading firm bought it in 1730 for Robert Morris, a tobacco exporter whose son, Robert Morris, Jr., came to live with him in 1747 at age 13—and who then went on to become a successful Philadelphia businessman and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. When the elder Robert Morris died in 1750, he had no idea of the pivotal role his son would play in financing the Continental Army a quarter century later. A close friend of George Washington, Robert Morris, Jr., served as Superintendent of Finance of



The Inn's signature crab cake.

the United States from 1781 to 1784 and was one of only two people to sign the three key documents of the American Revolution: the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution.

Over the years, the building has served as a town hall, boarding house, convalescent home for veterans of World War 1,

and a general store. It started operating as an inn in the 1940s.

Despite its historic pedigree, there's nothing stuffy about the Robert Morris Inn. It's welcoming and friendly—and essentially a family operation. Ian Fleming's daughter, Eve Blackwell, is the food and beverage manager. Her husband, Eric, is sous chef, and Mark Salter's three