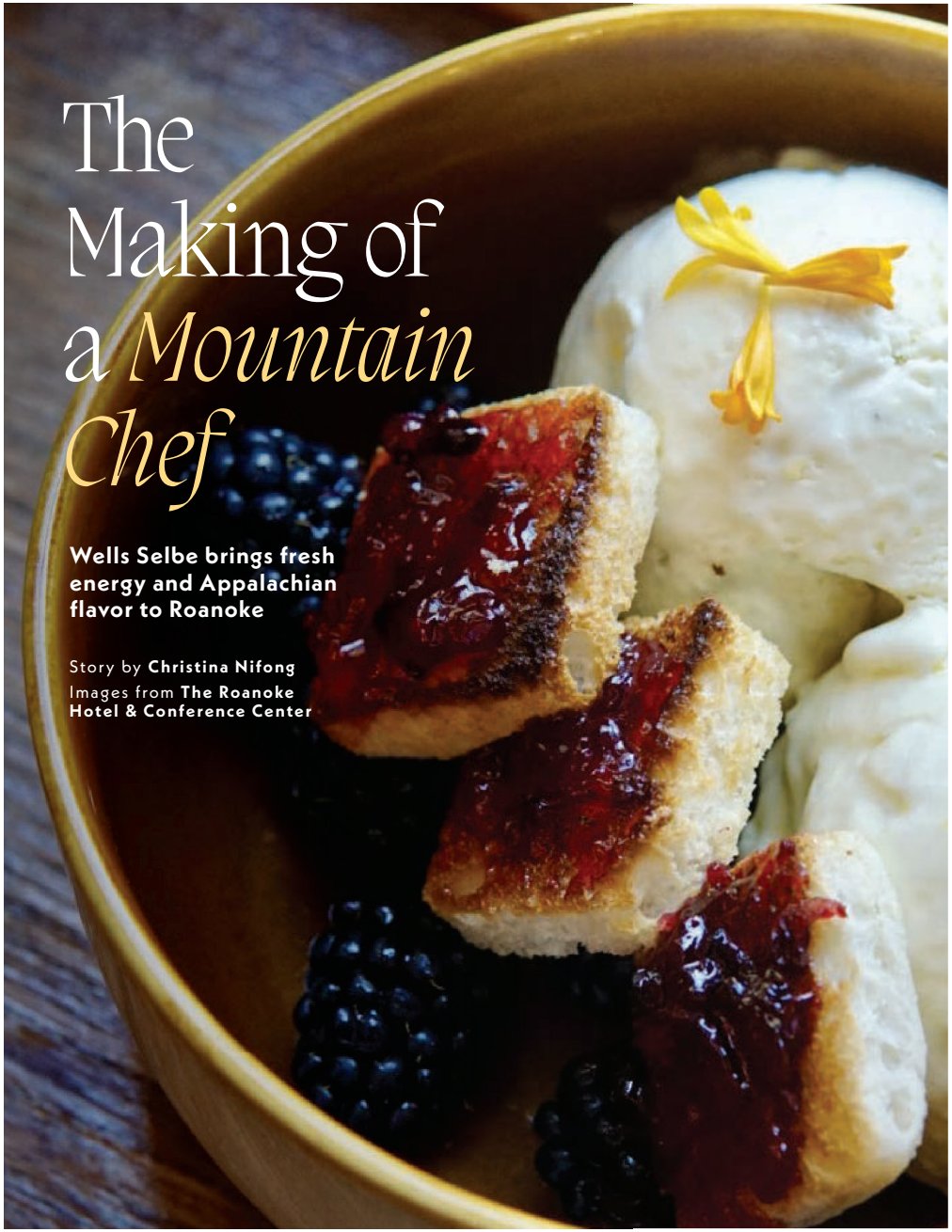

The Making of a *Mountain Chef*

Wells Selbe brings fresh energy and Appalachian flavor to Roanoke

Story by **Christina Nifong**
Images from **The Roanoke Hotel & Conference Center**

Wells Selbe practically trots as he moves through The Regency Room at The Hotel Roanoke & Conference Center. Opened in 1939, the restaurant is a storied setting where many a Virginian has celebrated a special occasion among the lacquered wood, white tablecloths, and brass sconces.

He is brimming with energy, ideas, and tales. "I grew up looking at this place across the train tracks," says Selbe, 38, with a pinch-me look on his youthful face. "And now I'm working here. It's an honor."

Not that Selbe hasn't earned his place as the hotel's newest chef de cuisine, overseeing service in The Regency Room and the more casual Pine Room, with its elevated pub fare and elegant patio seating.

He arrived last September after a stint as executive chef at Mountain Lake Lodge outside of Blacksburg, where he was in charge of daily breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, in addition to special events and weddings. His resume boasts time at The Inn at Little Washington, Southern standout Audrey in Nashville, as well as the legendary French restaurant Jean-Georges, and the Italian-American gem Don Angie, both in New York City.

But all those experiences, he says, can feel like they were leading him to this very dining room.

"There's probably no kitchen in Southwest Virginia that has better cooks," he says, scattering brightly colored blossoms atop a plate of frog legs and local leeks.

In truth, Selbe has been training for this role since before he was born. His mother, Victoria Longley, is founder and owner of Roanoke's Chanticleer Catering. Longley recalls bringing baby Wells in his car seat to catering jobs, introducing him to fine dining as a toddler, employing him as a runner, an elevator operator, and a van driver, as soon as he was able.

"Whatever there was to do," she says with a laugh. "He's always been around it, his whole life."

At 16, he flew to Paris for a five-week intensive training at Le Cordon Bleu, a renowned French culinary institute.

Top: Chef Wells Selbe. *Image by Lisa Davenport.* **Bottom:** Standing is Wells' Dad, Frank Selbe, and seated is his mom, Victoria Longley, founder and owner of Chanticleer Catering (where Wells worked as a kid). **Opposite:** The Nectarine Melba Toast pairs juicy nectarines with lemongrass coconut semifreddo and blackberry gelée for a refreshing finish.

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Selbe learned to chop, whisk, and sear, sure. He also learned to hustle. "You've got to make sure the performance is there," he says. "The show is going on, whether you're there or not. That spirit is definitely within me."

The bend in his path came when Selbe attended the University of Virginia and majored in anthropology. After graduation, he took a series of jobs in Roanoke in sales, marketing, and real estate. But by 2019, he had decided to return to the culinary world, this time on his own terms. He moved to New York City, landed a job as a line cook, and began climbing a new ladder.

When Selbe stopped by Hotel Roanoke a year ago to apply for the chef's position, Executive Chef Michael Whittaker was impressed by Selbe's training but also his commitment to sourcing local food and highlighting Appalachian flavors.

"He's classically trained, so he had a broad understanding of all the culinary fundamentals and arts," Whittaker says. "But how he represented the locally available product and his sense of Appalachia in his style — it's what I've been looking for to bring The Regency back up to the times."

Selbe's creativity has shone brightest during Hotel Roanoke's multi-course monthly wine dinners, offered to an intimate crowd and focused

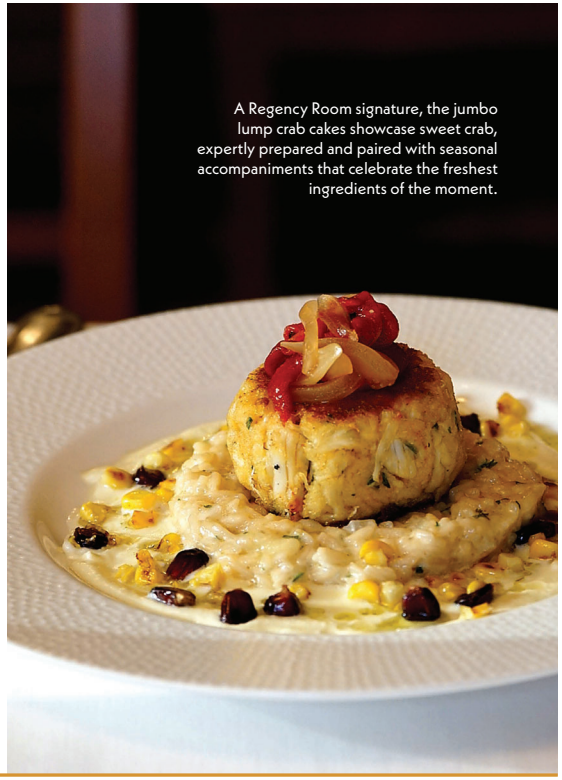
Top: Wells Selbe with Chef Robert Obst and Andrew Murray of Fire and Fork Fine Meats & Seafood at A Taste of the Sea wine dinner. **Bottom:** Chef Wells finishes the Yuzu Custard Tart tableside at a recent wine dinner. **Opposite:** Foie Gras Tartlet from A Taste of the Sea wine dinner featuring blueberry gastrique, dulse, and wild herbs.

on a region or theme. He has crafted meals around mead, seafood, Tuscany, and the '80s, often pairing with area chefs and producers, such as Atheling Meadworks and Bristol chef Travis Milton.

In his day-to-day, Selbe has concentrated on bringing a new spark to The Regency Room. While beloved items like peanut soup and shrimp and scallop Chesapeake will always be on the menu, he says, there's also room for vegan dishes, Asian influences, and heirloom varieties. The Regency's summer menu includes roast quail, Indian-spiced lamb chops, chicken succotash, and sweet tea ice cream.

Selbe often finds inspiration on the 55-acre farm his family owns in Franklin County, originally purchased as a site for weddings in connection with Longley's catering. Selbe uses it today to forage ingredients — like spicebush berries — to give his dishes a unique flavor.

As big a stage as Hotel Roanoke is, Selbe can't help but think even bigger. "The real hope is that we're able to elevate Roanoke's dining scene," he says. "People don't often think of Roanoke as a culinary destination. I think the goal is to change that."



A Regency Room signature, the jumbo lump crab cakes showcase sweet crab, expertly prepared and paired with seasonal accompaniments that celebrate the freshest ingredients of the moment.

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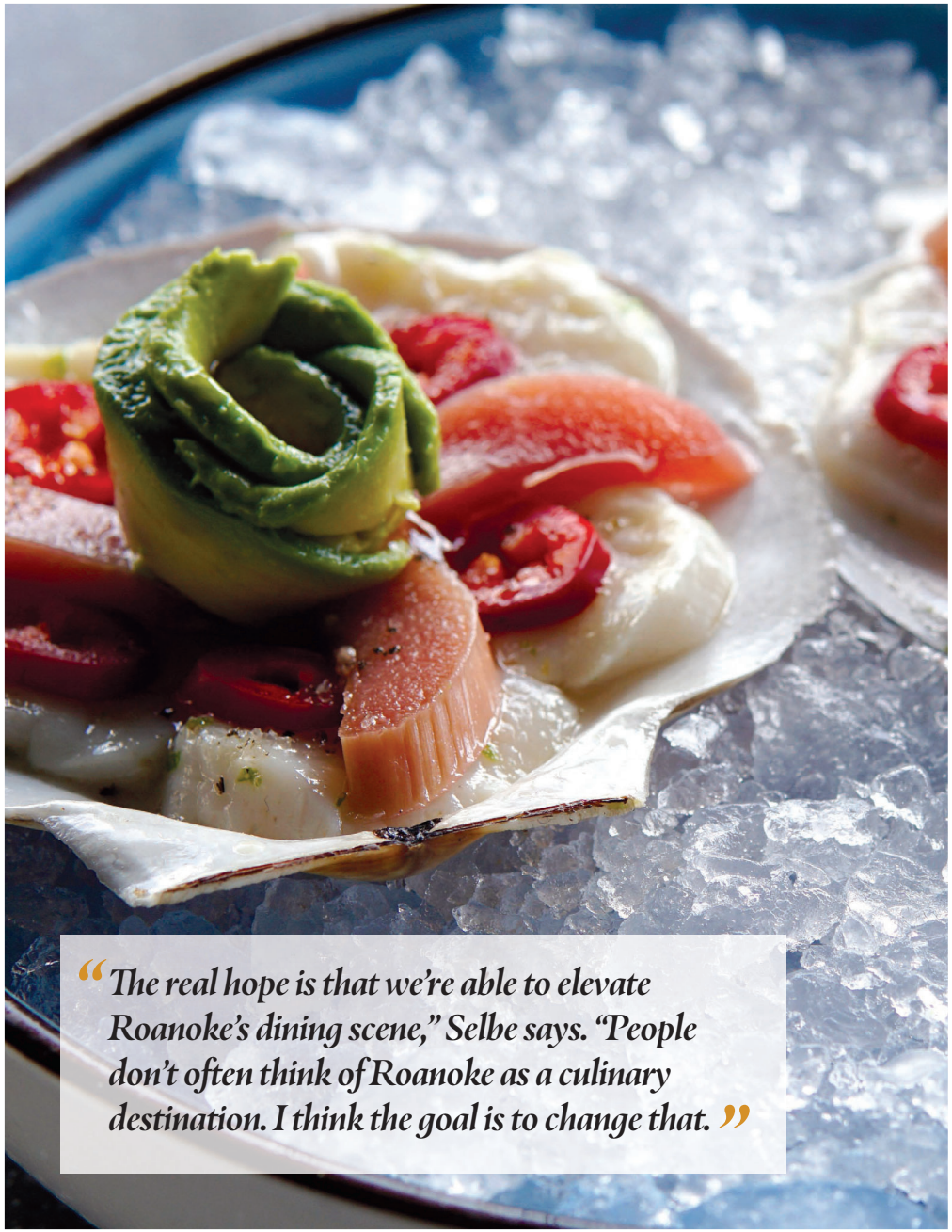
Featuring tender duck, grilled radicchios, cassava roasti, fresh orange, and a lemongrass tamarind glaze, the summer duck brings together citrus, smoke, and subtle sweetness in every bite.



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Scallops Crudo; silky scallops meet watermelon, yuzu, avocado, Fresno chili, aji, and lime in a dish that captures the flavor of the summer with every bite.