

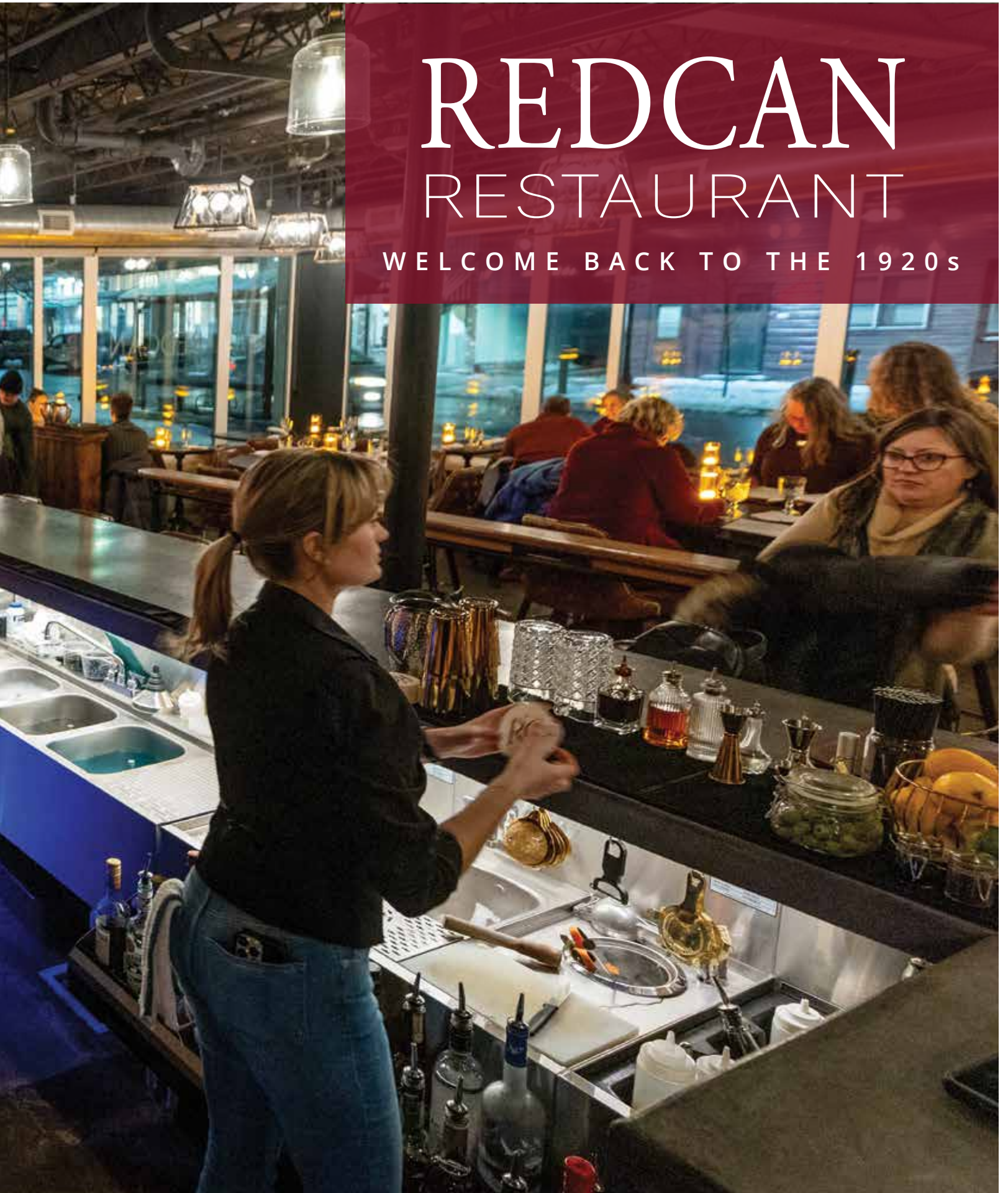
Overview of the Oyster Bar looking into the dining room.



The REDCAN name is an homage to Jason's late mother, who always had a can of Coke nearby.

REDCAN RESTAURANT

WELCOME BACK TO THE 1920s





Owners Leslie and Jason Merrill. Photo by Climb High Productions.

It's been open less than a year, and REDCAN restaurant in White River Junction, Vermont, already is booking out reservations three to four weeks in advance. It's easy to see why. In addition to an innovative menu, an oyster bar, a well-appointed dining area with a Prohibition vibe that seats 76, and a bar serving fun cocktails, there's a speakeasy lounge in the back of the restaurant that evokes the 1920s and '30s.

It's a longtime dream of Jason and Leslie Merrill, Vermont natives who are no strangers to restaurants. Jason says he's been in the business since he was 14, starting as a dishwasher. Locally, he was chef at the Hanover Inn and Jackson House in Woodstock. In 2012 he and co-owners Kurt Lessard and Dave Broderick opened Worthy Burger in South Royalton and followed that up in 2013 with Worthy Kitchen. While he is still involved in those eateries in a management role, Jason wanted to open a fine-dining restaurant. When the former Trail Break Taps + Tacos space opened up on Main Street in White River Junction, Jason and Leslie jumped at the chance to implement some of their ideas.





Top: Diners enjoy the ambiance of the main bar and Oyster Bar area.

Bottom left and right: Comfortable seating offers a view of downtown White River Junction. A choice of crudos from the Oyster Bar.



“We knew we wanted an oyster bar. There’s no place to get good oysters in town or the Upper Valley.” Their oysters come from the Boston Fish Pier and are sourced from Rhode Island up to Canada, and deliveries are made three times a week.



Top left: Jason delivers a dozen oysters.

Top center: Patrons enjoy chatting with the oyster chef at the Oyster Bar.

Above and above right: The shucking process. An oyster tray is ready for delivery.

Right: A tuna crudo dish.





“By trade I’m a fine-dining chef, and my wife and I both felt the need to have something a little more upscale and high-end in our area,” Jason says. We have some great restaurants and it’s nice to have another one for people to choose to go to.” The REDCAN name is an homage to his late mother, who always had a can of Coke nearby.

VINTAGE STYLE, LOCAL INGREDIENTS

“My wife and I like to graze through menus, so we set this menu up to be more grazing, but we also have a prix-fixe option. It’s quite an extensive menu. It’s different dishes that are pushing the edges with ingredients that people recognize. For example, our Cajun crusted salmon crudo. It’s salmon that is seared, but on the crudo side, so it’s lightly seared, chilled, and sliced raw with an andouille emulsion, pickles, preserved lemons, and red peppers. So it’s everything that people know but put together kind of fancy,” Jason explains. The menu changes according to the seasons.

Much of the food comes from local sources. “I’ve always been a farm to table chef and was a member of the slow food movement, which is about bringing native ingredients back. Here

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we try to use as many farms as we can,” says Jason. Leslie grew up on a nearby farm, and her family’s farm supplies the fresh corn in the summer.

As they envisioned the restaurant, “we knew we wanted an oyster bar. There’s no place to get good oysters in town or the Upper Valley.” Their oysters come from a the Boston Fish Pier and are sourced from Rhode Island up to Canada, and deliveries are made three times a week. “Last summer we were going through about 1,200 oysters. We’re down to about 800 a week now.”

COCKTAILS IN A COMFORTABLE SPEAKEASY

Other items they wanted in the restaurant included a higher-end cocktail program and a speakeasy. A television show about the history of Prohibition spurred the idea and led to the creation of a separate, warm, comfortable room that seats 20 at the back of the dining room with leather couches, decor from that era such a gramophone, and a cocktail menu inspired by drinks of that time period. There’s no food served in this space. “The speakeasy is for lounging and cocktails,” Jason says, “because back in the day you couldn’t get food in a speakeasy.”

The response from the community has been good, Jason reports. “We have a lot of regulars, a lot of new faces. Prime times are full. We open our reservation system four weeks prior to the day and it fills up pretty good. We have some walk-in

space available, and at the bar it’s first come, first served. If there’s a wait at the bar, people can come into the speakeasy and have cocktails while they’re waiting.”

Jason has high praise for his staff of about 32, including cooks, servers, and four bartenders. They all sport uniforms that are specific to the 1920s and ’30s with vests and ties. They’ve even had customers come in sporting period-specific outfits. Jason says the restaurant is available for private parties.

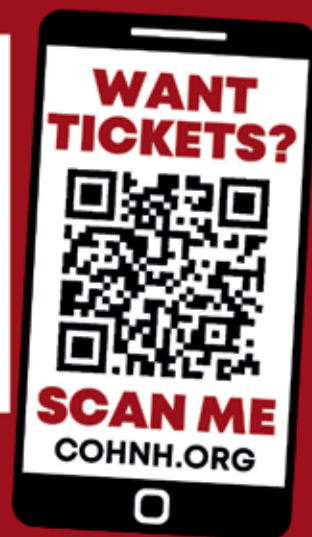
Away from the restaurant, Jason and Leslie are a self-described ski-racing family. “We’re always skiing when we’re not working,” Jason says. Their daughter attends Carrabasset Valley Academy, a ski and snowboard academy at the base of Sugarloaf Mountain in Maine, and Jason coached for about 20 years. While they still ski when they can, the restaurant is now their focus. Jason’s son in Montana is following in his father’s footsteps in the restaurant business. “It’s turned out better than I thought. We knew we’d be able to develop something really beautiful, but this is breathtaking.” ❁

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