feast

An alum from world-renowned The French Laundry joins Rick Erwin Dining Group

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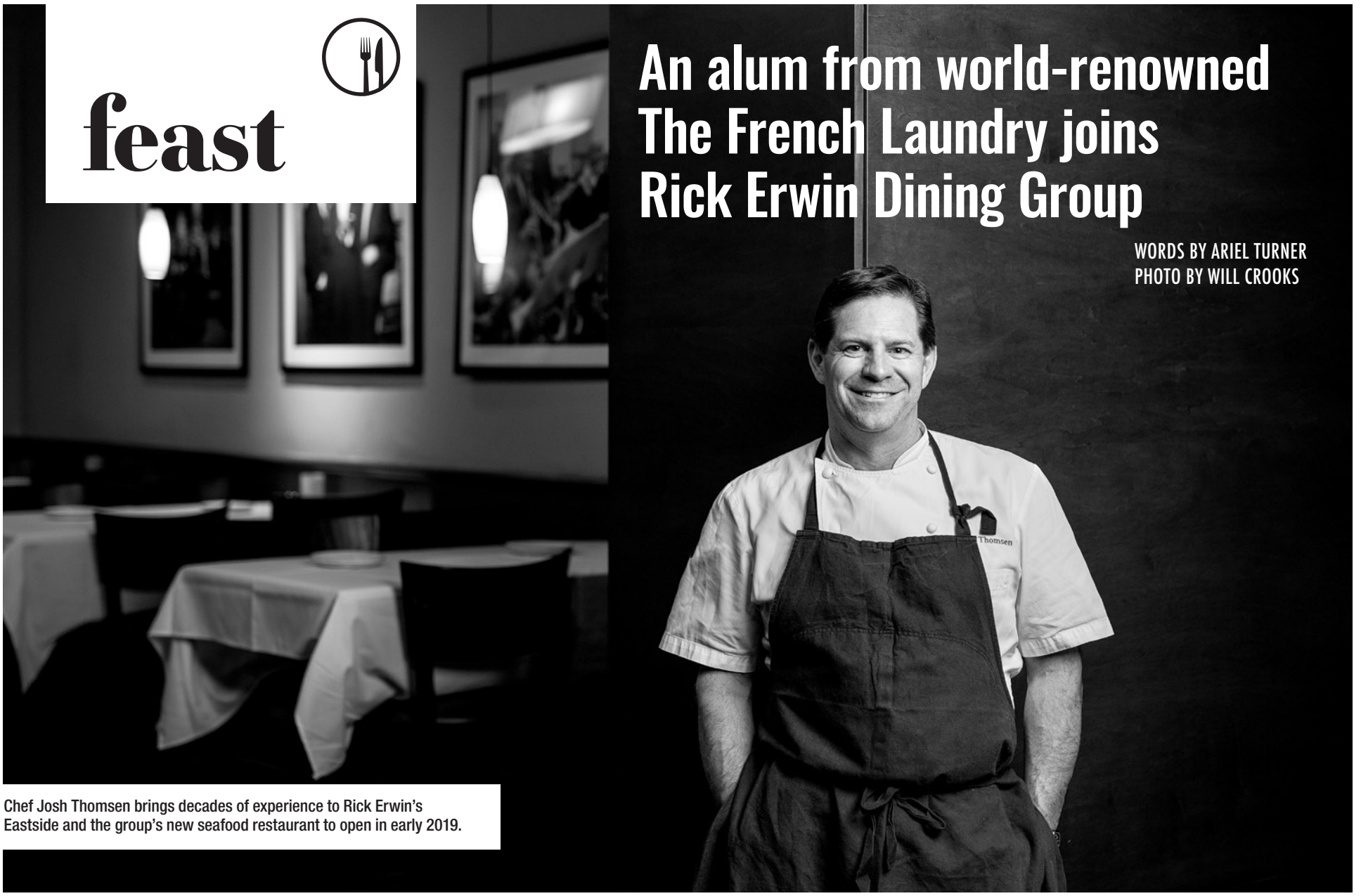

Chef Josh Thomsen brings decades of experience to Rick Erwin's Eastside and the group's new seafood restaurant to open in early 2019.

There's a relatively small group in the culinary world that can claim world-renowned chef Thomas Keller of The French Laundry as a personal friend.

Yet one of those elite has brought his craft to Greenville to help launch the Rick Erwin Dining Group's newest seafood restaurant in Haywood Mall with a planned early 2019 opening.

Chef Josh Thomsen, who has also taken the helm of Rick Erwin's Eastside on Pelham Road, spent 1996-1998 learning in The French Laundry kitchen from Keller, who would win James Beard Foundation awards for Best California Chef and Best Chef in America during those years.

The French Laundry in Napa Valley, California, with a three-star Michelin Guide rating it has maintained since 2007, has been the launch pad for some of the best chefs in country, and Keller's humility and work ethic despite the fame is something his students carry with them.

"Back then there were only 13 people in the kitchen, and chef Thomas was 13, and he worked side by side with us," Thomsen says. "He really, really became a mentor, and when I wrote a cookbook he wrote something on the back of it, so it's a relationship to this day that I love and still carry a lot of information from him."

The lessons he learned from Keller were as much about treating people well as they were about executing the perfect dish.

"To make sure that the guest gets what they want, it all starts in there," Thomsen says, gesturing to the kitchen. "In the sense of coming in and saying hello to everybody and saying goodbye to everybody in the kitchen. I'm not willing to ask someone to do something I'm not willing to do myself."

Thomsen, who held the executive chef position at Asheville, North Carolina's The Omni Grove Park Inn until he came to Greenville, worked his first day at RE Eastside in July. And he very quickly gave the menu a complete overhaul — only the company crab cake recipe remains.

The menu includes seven types of seafood and five meat options, along with flatbreads baked in the wood-burning pizza oven.

"Here at Eastside we try to have a little bit more balance of everything," Thomsen says. "We're a great neighborhood restaurant for people who live in our neighborhood on the eastside."

Balance is precisely why Thomsen made the career move he did.

"Working for Rick Erwin's has given me what I've always been missing, which I think most chefs are missing, and that's the balance of life," he says.

All Rick Erwin Dining Group restaurants are closed on Sundays and major holidays. Thomsen, having worked extensively in the type of hospitality environment where the busiest days of the year were often holidays, says this newfound home life away from the kitchen has been exactly what he needed. He jokes that his two young sons asked if he lost his job because of how much more time he's able to spend with them.

Thomsen's resume includes most-recently the Eau Palm Beach Resort & Spa in Manalapan, Florida, where as executive chef he oversaw four dining venues, 30,000 square feet of banquet space, and in-room dining for 300 guest rooms and a private club level. He also raised the property from a Forbes four-star/five diamond ranking to five-star/five-diamond status, a rating it held for the duration of his two-year service.

A New Jersey native, he previously spent three years as executive chef/partner of Agricola in Princeton, where he penned the cookbook "Agricola." He also served four years as executive chef of Claremont Resort in Berkeley, California, where he was recognized as a "Rising Star Chef" by StarChefs.com in 2010.

Thomsen brings decades of experience to both RE Eastside and the new restaurant, for which he is currently in menu development, but makes it clear, he is not a one-man show and needs his team.

"The guys [in the kitchen] are hearing all the great things from the guests from all the changes that we're doing, so it's really working out, but again, just treating everybody like an equal," he says. "Yeah, I'm the executive chef, but the bottom line is, everyone is just as important."