10 Reasons Washington Is a Great Restaurant City

The capital's dining scene has gotten a bad rap as stodgy, status-driven and lacking a strong identity. These restaurants prove otherwise.

An array of dishes at Bad Saint, a tiny Filipino restaurant with a big reputation. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

By Brett Anderson

Oct. 29, 2019

141

WASHINGTON — In 2016, Andrew Knowlton, then the restaurant editor of Bon Appétit, proposed that the magazine name Washington its restaurant city of the year. It was a difficult argument to make, even to the magazine's editor, Adam Rapoport, a Washington native.

"He laughed," Mr. Knowlton recalled. "Then he told me to get out of his office. He didn't believe me."

In the end, the city won that honor, and has since drawn similar recognition from other food-world arbiters, even getting its own Michelin Guide. But it still chafes under a reputation that has bedeviled its dining scene for decades: that it has little culinary excitement or any distinctive identity. In this view, the strivers coursing through the capital's halls of power represent the entire population; luxury, status and predictability rule in the kitchen, and the best meal to be had is a dry-aged steak.

Truth is, District of Columbia restaurants are far more interesting than that, and have been for a long time. The vibrant scene now attracting attention rose on a foundation built by members of a culinary deep state, and a diverse constellation of restaurants that have flourished here.

The complexities that arise from being a nexus of immigration, power and wealth have traditionally been reflected even in the city's expense-account haunts, notably those operated by the Indian-American restaurateur Ashok Bajaj, the Spanish-American chef José Andrés and, before them, the revered French chefs Jean-Louis Palladin and Michel Richard. Washington's population has long been predominantly African-American, and the district (just to give one example) has the largest population of Ethiopians outside Ethiopia.

While new places like the Dabney join old favorites like Johnny's Half-Shell to provide the country's strongest collection of restaurants serving seafood-intensive Mid-Atlantic cuisine, the very absence of a dominant local culinary style makes the city particularly hospitable to new voices and innovations. Its personality lies in its multiculturalism: The most powerful force driving the critical reassessments are restaurants from immigrant and first-generation American chefs and restaurateurs, many of whom cut their teeth in the surrounding suburbs.

The perfect gift for everyone on your list.
Gift subscriptions to The Times. Starting at $25.

Doing business here isn't as cheap as it used to be. The city, according to one recent study, is undergoing the most intense gentrification in the country, displacing many residents. But many new restaurants, opening in small storefronts, are also bringing fresh life to residential neighborhoods, where relatively low overhead enables creative risks.

The 10 restaurants, both newcomers and veterans, listed here in no particular order, serve up the ambitious, wide-ranging cooking that Washington is finally getting credit for.

Subscribe to Five Weeknight Dishes
Fresh dinner ideas for busy people who want something great to eat, with NYT Cooking recipes sent to you weekly.
SIGN UP

Editors' Picks

Stop! Don't Charge Your Phone This Way

Three Students, $3,000 and a Dream: An Affordable Brooklyn Apartment. Where Did They Wind Up?

The Mister Rogers No One Saw

The chef, Yuan Tang, plates foie gras with roasted beets at Rooster & Owl. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

Rooster & Owl

Yuan and Carey Tang grew up in suburban Falls Church, Va., and moved back to Washington from New York with a dream of opening an ambitious restaurant within their limited means. “As owners who wanted to maintain full equity, we didn’t have much choice,” Ms. Tang said. In February, they opened this unassuming place with a user-friendly four-course, $65 tasting menu that offers multiple choices and achieves lofty goals but defies thumbnail description. Recent dishes have included burrata strewn with local ground cherries and crushed pistachios, shiitake larb wrapped in butter lettuce leaves with white peaches, and a Brie custard crossed by Ritz cracker shortbreads. Mr. Tang, a Hong Kong native, comes from a family of chefs and restaurateurs and trained in some of New York’s best kitchens, including the Good Fork and Jean-Georges. At Dovetail, now closed, Ms. Tang said her husband learned “to think creatively about everything.”

2436 14th Street NW, roosterowl.com

See also: Chiko, a Chinese-Korean fast-casual restaurant that offers a tasting menu, with locations in Dupont Circle and Capitol Hill.

Red goat curry at Thip Khao, a Laotian restaurant in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

Thip Khao

Seng Luangrath spurred a local renaissance for the herbal, funky, often spicy cooking of her native Laos when she opened Thip Khao in 2014. Customers of her first restaurant, Padaek, in Falls Church, coaxed her to open this stylishly casual cafe in Washington, where many of them live. The chef struck a chord with dishes like the crispy coconut-rice salad with fermented pork (nam khao) and her red goat curry, famous for its furnace-blast heat. Ms. Luangrath has since doubled her group of Lao food businesses: she also runs Sen Khao, a noodle shop in McLean, Va., and Hanumanh, a 30-seat bar with small-plates in the city’s Shaw neighborhood.

3462 14th Street NW, thipkhao.com

See also: Laos in Town, which was opened in April in the NoMa neighborhood by two Lao-food-loving partners from Bangkok.

Steamed brioche topped with trout roe is a one-bite signature at Komi. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

Komi

Johnny Monis opened Komi in Dupont Circle in 2003, making the restaurant he owns with his wife and partner, Anne Marler, the oldest on this list. It's also, arguably, the most influential. In its early years, Komi still carried some of the DNA of the Alexandria, Va., sandwich and pizza shop owned by his Greek-immigrant parents, where Mr. Monis worked growing up. (His birth name is Ioanis.) In 2006, Komi briefly closed, reopening as a considerably more ambitious tasting-menu restaurant. The result is a soulful, Greek-inspired antidote to Mr. Andrés's hyper-experimental Minibar; both restaurants helped point the way toward the city's present status as a leader in what The Washington Post's food critic Tom Sietsema calls "fun fine-dining." Dinner in Komi's narrow dining room often begins with one-bite steamed brioche topped with trout roe; a meal in August proceeded with yogurt-and-garlic scape plumped ravioli and a juicy-fleshed, shawarma-spiced amberjack collar. Mr. Monis, 40, echoed the sentiments of many younger restaurateurs here when he said, in an email, that Komi's success is rooted in its innocent, bootstrap beginnings: "That naïveté was probably our greatest strength, because we weren't afraid of anything."

1509 17th Street NW, komirestaurant.com

See also: Pineapple and Pearls, the chef Aaron Silverman's playful tasting-menu restaurant, in a Capitol Hill storefront that's a coffee shop during the day.

Kwame Onwuachi, the chef of Kith and Kin, is a prodigious talent who has worked at Per Se and Eleven Madison Park in New York. T.J. Kirkpatrick for The New York Times

Kith and Kin

What you see is a fancy restaurant not unlike the expense-account places that have thrived here for generations, found inside the multibillion-dollar development that has transformed the Wharf neighborhood along the Potomac River. What you taste is something else. Kwame Onwuachi, the 29-year-old chef, focuses his prodigious talent — he's an alumnus of Per Se and Eleven Madison Park in New York — on a wide spectrum of Afro-Caribbean cooking. The menu blends dressed-up versions of homestyle dishes from the African diaspora (curried goat, jerk chicken) with abstracted studies of dishes with similar roots (uni escovitch, compressed cucumbers with gooseberry piri-piri). The results are both delicious and a reminder of the depth and breadth of a global, interconnected cooking tradition that resonates poignantly here. "D.C. is a predominantly African-American city," Mr. Onwuachi said. "To be able to celebrate that on a plate is something I'm incredibly grateful for."

801 Wharf Street SW, kithandkindc.com

See also: Florida Avenue Grill, where Washingtonians have been eating fried croaker with grits since 1944.

Requests from regulars at his Baltimore restaurant led the chef Enrique Limardo to open Seven Reasons in Washington. The upstairs dining room is shown here. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

Seven Reasons

The chef Enrique Limardo says he received so many requests to open a restaurant in Washington from diners who traveled to his Baltimore restaurant, Alma Cocina Latina, that he finally told one person, “If you can find me investors, I’ll do it.” Long story short, Mr. Limardo, who immigrated from Venezuela in 2014, moved to Washington in March to open Seven Reasons. His plate presentations evoke memories of the sauce-striped nuevo-Latino cooking of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The food itself is the work of a skilled technician with impressive command over an array of influences. Wagyu carpaccio rethinks veal tonnato with a sauce of tuna and heart of palm and fried potato “paper.” Swordfish belly and trout roe ride a tostada atop a green mango salad. “Venezuela has a really nice mix of influences in the food — Spanish, Italian, Indian, Chinese,” said Mr. Limardo, who traveled the world as a private chef after fleeing his country’s political and economic turmoil. “These flavors come natural to me.” Later this year, Mr. Limardo and his partners plan to open a fast-casual restaurant called Immigrant Food a block from the White House.

2208 14th Street NW, sevenreasonsdc.com

See also: El Tamarindo, a down-home Mexican-Salvadoran restaurant that has been satisfying local diners with pupusas since 1982.

Fried sugar toads, a puffer fish found in the waters off the Mid-Atlantic coast, at Queen’s English. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

Queen’s English

Queen’s English, which opened in Columbia Heights in April, follows in the recent local tradition of jewel-box restaurants (there are 40 seats) featuring Asian cuisine, in this case that of the New Territories region of Hong Kong, where Henji Cheung, the chef and owner, was born. The restaurant, decorated in antiques and chinoiserie-print wallpaper, has the dainty allure of a teahouse, only with cocktails and big-flavor small plates in place of light refreshments. Mr. Cheung, a former executive sous-chef at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, cooks with precision and gusto. His chicken-and-seafood stuffed tofu skin, crowned with vinegar-braised cabbage, eats like boudin blanc. Both he and his wife and partner, Sarah Thompson, who presides over the dining room and drinks, revel in local products. Try the Chesapeake Bay sugar toads — a puffer fish, fried and spiked with pink peppercorns — with a hard cider or piquette from Old Westminster Winery in Maryland.

3410 11th Street NW, queensenglishdc.com

See also: Astoria, a Dupont Circle cocktail bar with Sichuan food from the bartender-turned-cook Devin Gong.

Victor Albisu, the chef at Poca Madre in Washington's Chinatown, prepares charred cabbage with mole verde. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

Poca Madre

Victor Albisu grew up in Falls Church, the son of a Cuban father and a Peruvian mother, who still runs a Latin food market. "I became really immersed in understanding not just Cuban food and Peruvian food but the cuts of meats of different cultures," he said, "the different chiles of Mexico, the different empanadas, who uses yuca, who doesn't." This wide-angle vision of Latin-American cooking first came to life at Taco Bamba, a local chain of taquerias, primarily in suburban Virginia. It takes on new dimensions at Poca Madre, the upscale Mexican restaurant Mr. Albisu opened last year in Washington's Chinatown. The chef makes deft use of citrus, chiles and even mole to draw out nuanced flavors in seafood. But don't miss the luscious whole duck, cooked al pastor style.

777 I Street NW, pocamadredc.com

See also: El Sapo Cuban Social Club, the chef Raynold Mendizábal's festive ode to his native country's food and music, in Silver Spring, Md.

Spicy lamb noodles with chile paste and herbs at Maketto, where the dishes are a mashup of Taiwanese and Cambodian cuisine. Jennifer Chase for the New York Times

Maketto

Storefronts along H Street NE, once a tableau of decay, are now occupied by agents of youth and gentrification like Maketto, a combined designer-streetwear retailer, coffee shop and restaurant where the chef Erik Bruner-Yang mashes up Taiwanese and Cambodian cuisine. The cooking is dizzyingly aromatic: lamb noodles alive with fermented chile paste, grill-smoked duck hearts brined in nuoc cham, and sweet-hot fried chicken. Mr. Bruner-Yang was born in Taipei, and his wife, Pechseda Nak, is of Cambodian descent, so Maketto may be the most personal of his restaurants — ABC Pony, his soon to open Italian-Asian restaurant in the Navy Yard, will be his fourth. "People see D.C. now with a wider lens," said the chef, a former musician who has worked with a variety of collaborators in his many projects. "What you have is a lot of second- and first-generation Americans like myself, and they're just expressing themselves."

1351 H Street NE, maketto1351.com

See also: Spoken English, a tachinomiya-style standing bar, one of two places Mr. Bruner-Yang operates in the Line DC hotel, in Adams Morgan.

Chicken adobo at Bad Saint, a 24-seat Filipino restaurant in Columbia Heights. Jennifer Chase for The New York Times

Bad Saint

Weighing in at 24 seats, many within arm's length of a rudimentary open kitchen, Bad Saint is defined by its size as well as its Filipino food. "It felt less risky to go with a small space," said Genevieve Villamora, who owns the restaurant with Nick Pimentel, both of them children of Filipino immigrants. The space is the reason that reservations are limited, and that the lines trend long for walk-in seats; it also fosters intimacy around the food of the chef, Tom Cunanan, who was born in the Philippines. The cooking is modestly presented, but often extravagantly delicious, with flavors that taste like fresh revelations: the notes of squid-ink musk in a sour-hot adobo, or the charred coconut that provides a vanilla rasp to goat braised with lemongrass. Bad Saint's creators had modest expectations for their business, which opened in 2015 in the Columbia Heights neighborhood. It has become a huge hit, getting three stars from the Times critic Pete Wells, and this year a James Beard award for Mr. Cunanan.

3226 11th Street NW, badsaintdc.com

See also: Izakaya Seki, a hidden outpost for Japanese bar food that turns its small space into an asset; it is owned by the daughter-father team Cizuka and Hiroshi Seki.

Del Mar, in the Wharf district, is the sixth restaurant from the chef Fabio Trabocchi. The upstairs dining room is available for private parties. T.J. Kirkpatrick for The New York Times

Del Mar

Fabio Trabocchi landed in Washington from his native Italy at the age of 21. "I didn't speak a word of English or Spanish," he said. After stops in New York and London, he returned to put down roots with his wife and business partner, Maria Font Trabocchi, who was born in Spain. "I never would have imagined when I was 21 that I'd one day have six restaurants in the city," said Mr. Trabocchi, now 45 and a James Beard winner. Del Mar, in the Wharf district, is the latest, and the first that isn't Italian. The restaurant presents traditional cooking from the coast of Spain in essentially the same way Del Posto, in New York, does traditional Italian: It pairs Michelin-grade service with dishes that are either textbook classics (squid-ink stained paella, crab-stuffed piquillo peppers) or respectful modernizations (raw tuna with tomato jelly and sea beans).

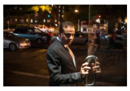
791 Wharf Street SW, delmardc.com

See also: Jaleo, the downtown tapas restaurant that is the flagship of the global empire of José Andrés.

More on Washington Restaurants

A Young Chef, and a Stunning Comeback April 16, 2019

Right This Way, Senator Aug. 12, 2013



Filipino Food Worth the Wait at Bad Saint in Washington Nov. 29, 2016

Follow NYT Food on Twitter and NYT Cooking on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Pinterest. Get regular updates from NYT Cooking, with recipe suggestions, cooking tips and shopping advice.