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Chefs in the city

by Sarah Gilbert Fox

Portraits by Kirsten Beckerman

The crème de la crème of Baltimore chefs have some things in common— they're exceptionally affable; they're urbane and educated; they're driven by the seasons; they have a passion for their craft; and, lest there is concern, they all know how to make a mean crab cake. But the similarities end there. They are as unique as they are exceptional. For those who haven't had the pleasure of sitting at their tables, Style offers a vicarious pictorial menu of personality and taste. For those who have had the pleasure of being served at one of their restaurants, we offer a goût du voyage down memory lane.



Stock Player: brian boston

The Milton Inn

One word: stocks. The basis for every meal Brian Boston produces comes from his homemade stocks. He roasts bones for hours (veal, beef, chicken, lamb), then simmers them overnight with a mirepoix; next, he skims the broth continuously for impurities, then strains it, reducing it to the cleanest, most luscious-tasting stock imaginable. "It's a process that takes about four days— we don't short-cut the sauces," he says. "Fresh ingredients, prepared in a loving way, make good things happen." His favorite cooking tool: "My hands. They tell you things. I can touch a piece of meat and tell how it's cooked. I can do intricate, delicate work cutting fruit. You have to be able to feel the food." He tries not to get too trendy, but he keeps up with innovative, cutting-edge cuisine in the sides he serves and the presentations. "Real food doesn't need to be trendy. I want to be able to do the best again and again. If you serve something to someone today, it should be just as good 20 years from now." And, being

from Baltimore County, he knows that Baltimoreans love their crab. "Put crab on anything and they'll order it. And they love their red meat. They don't want their food to be too fancy and they want a big portion," Boston says. "Don't give them the small food. They want to be fed."



Salt of the Earth: jason ambrose

Salt

Although originally from Connecticut, once Jason Ambrose arrived on the doorstep of Baltimore, he was hooked. "What I love about Baltimore is that it's a blue-collar town. It's down to earth," he says. "When I arrived, I felt like I was home." Your loss, our gain, Connecticut. Our luck is evident as soon as the food lands on our plate: a tuna poke (cucumber ginger granite, spicy peanut brittle), followed by tender grilled duroc pork tenderloin (with peach salsa, asparagus, tarragon and Dijon fingerling salad), and don't forget a side of his famed duck-fat french fries. Ambrose's eclectic American cuisine is Salvador Dali-ish, where memories come to the forefront, but where other tastes are so far out that they surprise the palate. While pushing the imagination envelope, Ambrose remembers to keep some comfort food in there, too. "It's very funny and amusing to me that Salt

became this huge and trendy restaurant," he says. "The word 'trendy' is thrown around so much, but I drive a 1997 Cavalier with 187,000 miles. I live a very simple life."



The New Basics: kevin miller

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Ixia

Kevin Miller is as down to earth as the restaurant in which he cooks is wildly over-the-top. The brilliant David Briskie-blue walls complement Miller's cooking perfectly— this is new American food with a Mediterranean influence. Start with sweet potato and squash gnocchi served with a Vermont maple cream sugar brûlée and roasted pecans and, hello gourmet comfort food! No surprises here. Miller is a direct descendant of the Starkloff Rambauer "Joy of Cooking" clan. Raised with farm-fresh eggs, a country ham always hanging in the basement and a grandmother who taught him when he was 6 how to make angel biscuits with fresh honey, he was predisposed to take a culinary path. And because of his inherent knowledge of the basics, he's able to make a crab cake do the tango— knowing he has to stay loyal to the jumbo-lump crabmeat and the Baltimore palate, he plays with the sides instead, forgoing the potatoes, and offering up a popcorn mouselline instead (yep, popcorn moussed!). Yet no matter how experimental he can be on the surface, underneath Miller is a cool, laid-back guy who just loves to cook.

The Natural: spike gjerde



Woodberry Kitchen

If the term "local sustainable sourcing" makes your eyes glaze over, read up (a good book: Barbara Kingsolver's "Animal, Vegetable, Miracle"). For those who know about local sustainable sourcing— and for those whose taste buds have had the pleasure of eating foods grown locally— Spike Gjerde is the go-to man. "There's a real commitment here. Every dollar we don't spend locally is a wasted dollar," he says. "Fine dining is discretionary spending, and to be able to eat where local farmers are supported is exciting to me." Gjerde practices what he preaches, from his food sources to his

menu (even the graphics are locally produced from recycled antique wood blocks) to his cooking with a wood-burning stove. "It's the oldest cooking technology," he explains. "Bricks, fire, local hardwoods. It's really just a glorified fireplace that, even with its environmental hazards, is at least carbon-neutral." The brick-oven roasted chicken that Gjerde prepares is a small wonder. While in a lot of restaurants chicken is a default for those who don't want to eat what the chef has really been cooking, at Woodberry, the chicken is succulent enough to make anyone want to ditch their gas ovens. Woodberry Kitchen, Gjerde believes, is like a Prius: "On the surface, it looks like a regular car, but underneath, there's an amazing, innovative technology." Now if he could only figure out a local sustainable source for citrus, he'd be really happy. "People still want lemon with their iced tea. I'm trying out different ways to do citrus. Who knows, maybe in 10 years, we'll finally be able to grow citrus here."



Just for Fun: ted stelzenmuller

Jack's Bistro

Ted Stelzenmuller is known as the chef's chef. Like the duck-billed platypus, Stelzenmuller is sui generis (one of a kind), known for such bizarre combinations as Pop Rocks-topped tuna steaks, pink peppercorn lavender ice cream and his ever-popular macaroni, cheese and chocolate. While these dishes might sound strange, there's a method to the madness. "All these ideas are really based on sound technique," he says, referring to the fact that chocolate cheesecake uses cream cheese, and a little sugar on top of tuna brings out the flavor. "I threw out the cookbook years ago," he continues. "Once you get a good knowledge of food, it stunts your growth to follow recipes." Stelzenmuller is obsessed with pushing boundaries because, as he sees it, "there's so much of the same out there. Most people believe other things won't work; I've broken the reins and gone nuts." If any of this sounds too wacky, trendy or experimental, take a peek inside his little, casual, "jeans welcome" bistro late-night after the dinner crowd has gone home and note the number of other Baltimore chefs eating the bacon sliders (an all-bacon ground burger) or the sous vide bistro steak frites, or the "fudgie eggs" (named for their mousse-like texture)... proof that Stelzenmuller is definitely onto something.

Local Boy Makes Good: john shields

Gertrude's



Question: What's better? The way John Shields cooks or the way he talks? Let's just say he cooks the way he talks— or he talks the way he cooks. In fact, when asked about his cooking, he says, "I'm a cross between Fats Waller and George Gershwin... both of them had a handful of keys." And why Baltimore? "I was born here at 25th and Greenmount Avenue, and I started cooking at 21st and Greenmount at St. Ann's Church when I was 7 years old." He worked beside his now-famous grandmother, Gertie (the source of his restaurant's name), to bring food and a sense of camaraderie to the table for the bustling crowds of the day. It was there that he experienced his first taste of immediate gratification and exquisite food. Today, his cooking leitmotif is quintessential Chesapeake — an honest expression of his home region. "You don't want to do only crab cakes, but you need to know where you are," he explains. Basil-caper tartar sauce to go along with that all-lump crab cake, and a side of apple-fennel coleslaw, anyone? But back to the way he talks— and he's talking about

the environment: "One of the worst things that happened to civilization might have been ChemLawn. You have these big, manicured lawns and everything looks neat, but you don't have dandelions, and if you don't have dandelions, you don't have dandelion greens, and if you don't have dandelion greens, what are spring and summer for?!"



Whistling Dixie: cindy wolf

Charleston

Cindy Wolf offers a new vocabulary for food— maybe one that doesn't yet exist, since some of life's more exquisite things just can't be expressed in words. So, for the moment, let's just settle for "yum." "I cook with local produce: heirloom tomatoes, local peas, crowder peas, herbs that are phenomenal. No pesticides, ever," Wolf says. Her background is Pennsylvania Dutch cooking, heavily influenced by Southern food, and infused for the past 10 years with French fare. "Whether it's a no-star or a three-star restaurant, there are a lot of great opportunities to eat good food in France." And as far as she's concerned, Baltimore has a sophisticated-enough taste palate. "It's always been my great pleasure working in Baltimore, because I've pretty much put everything on the menu and the guests will eat it." Wolf's idea of comfort food is a pheasant breast served over white rice with lavender, with a tasso cream sauce on top, and, of course, bread baked in a wood-burning oven. And well, again, where is the vocabulary for that? Perhaps the best place to look is not in a dictionary, but at the art of her favorite artist, the lyrical Wolf Kahn. "His work is about the landscape, and mine is about cooking seasonal...There's a correlation there."



Musical Chairs: linwood dame

Linwoods

Take two parts jazz, a dash of techno, cover it with some blues, then fold in some classical and combine; what will end up on your plate is a sizzling heart-and-soul concert by chef Linwood Dame. "Good cooking is all about being creative, but doing it right," he says. "What's that burst of flavor going to deliver? How many ingredients can you use or not use to get that flavor? At the end of the day, it's all about the simplicity of food." Is it any wonder that Linwoods has been a Baltimore tradition for more than 20 years? Of course you can expect a beef tenderloin to enchant you at this Owings Mills mainstay, but expectations needn't stop there— that glorious steak is going to arrive at your table with a vibrant backbeat of black pepper steak sauce and a side of truffle-infused pommes frites and seasonal greens. And to heighten the drama, Dame works his cross-rhythms in an open kitchen. "You can't cheat in an open kitchen," he says. "There's action going on. It's entertainment."

And if there's one thing Dame wants everyone to know about his cooking, it's that whatever is delivered to the table is as seasonal as it gets. "I'm hitting the farmers' market this morning, and already thinking about next season's vegetables," he says. We can almost hear his fingers snapping along.



To Market, To Market: galen sampson

The Dogwood

Things that are seasonal— at the peak of their goodness— are the essence behind Galen Sampson's cuisine. On Saturdays when he was young, his parents would say, "Let's go to the market and see what's good." He remembers them driving down highway 140 and "there'd be guys selling oysters on the side of the road. The farmers would put out a stand at their driveway, and you picked out what you wanted and put your money in a cigar box. There was an honor system and the food was fresh." He learned early that good cooking was not about covering everything up, but letting the flavors of the foods sing on their own. "People don't realize the flavors you get from a properly raised bird," he says. Sampson uses only pasture-ranged chickens and slow-roasts them in a white wine and herb marinade. He enjoys taking things that are good on their own and letting them play together, such as his layered stratta potato dish— a combination of sweet potatoes layered on top of Yukon golds with celery root added. He cooks the way his favorite photographer, Galen Rowell, takes photographs. "He has a way of catching things on film that inspire us, but that we take for granted. He makes us appreciate them again. He makes a wow out of simplicity."



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