

## Confessions of a Foodie

*A year of Food Finds and Restaurant Ruminations in my New Hometown*

Vicki Wilson

I remember my first root beer. Frothy and sweet, tickling me from my tongue to my toes. I had never had anything like it – the sensation was so extraordinary. I was, I think, eight at the time. It seems I've been cataloguing my life in terms of food ever since.

Friendly's cheeseburgers, served on toast that soaked up the juices just right. Chicken Kiev, a rapture in butter and chives. Lazy Man's lobster at Union Oyster House in Boston, the sweet meat laced with sherry and bread crumbs. Ahhh, the food memories of my New England childhood.

Is it any wonder I married a restaurant man? My husband's job has taken us on eating tours of Italy, where I discovered ribollita, panini, and gelati in between the 12 course tasting menus of Italy's finest restaurants. What do I remember of France and Belgium? Why, crepes with Chantilly cream, fresh raspberries on the Rue Cler, beef carbonnade and Belgian frites. Chinois, Chez Panisse, Charlie Trotter's, Union Square Café – it's not what I saw in the big cities that I remember; it's what and where I ate!

I measure my life not in months, but in meals. They say some eat to live, others live to eat. Well I imagine you've figured out where I fit in. It's no surprise then, that food tops my list of memorable experiences as I look back on my first year in D.C. (not forgetting, of course, the wonderful people I've met, the writing I've done and the friendly neighborhood I find myself a part of).

I really have to begin with the Café at Nordstrom. Full disclosure: my husband runs the in-store food service for the stores on the East coast, which is the reason we moved here to begin with. And, hey, the shopping is great, but the food is even better. The creamy she-crab soup, Chinese chicken salad and

bistro chicken sandwich are a delicious detour during any shopping trip.

For juicy roast chicken without turning on your oven, Chicken Out is in. A far cry from Michelin three-star restaurants in Italy, I know, but there's a reason it made the list. Chicken Out is where our real estate agent brought us for lunch the day we decided on our house in Bethesda. The only rotisserie chicken place I'd been to at that time was, well, you know, the other one. I think Chicken Out is so much better. I don't even want to know how much butter goes into the stuffing with cornbread and apples – I just know it tastes like Thanksgiving. For repentance, try the sweet potatoes – one of several heart-healthy items.

Next stop on my menu of memories would have to be room service at the Ritz Carlton in Tyson's Corner. When we brought our boys here to give them a look at their new home, my husband decided to make it special by checking us into a suite at the Ritz-Carlton. As it turned out, both boys had horrible colds, and all they wanted to do was stay in bed. Thank goodness for chicken noodle soup from room service! (Later on, I discovered the cozy lobby bar is a comfortable place for a drink and a chat with a new-found girlfriend).

On to Georgetown and the warm, neighborhood feeling of Clyde's. When friends from Chicago came along to help us with our initial move-in, we had a blast there – the kind of night that made me feel like the move might turn out okay. I highly recommend the savory crab and artichoke dip and the apple, arugula and bleu cheese salad, a delicious blend of fall flavors. If you have the nerve you might get the chance to sing along with the live entertainment Clyde's has in the bar sometimes – especially if you've imbibed a couple of their perfect Cosmopolitans!

Still in Georgetown, a couple more favorites. One is the Philadelphia Cheesesteak Factory, a hearty way to negate a bike ride along the canal and into Georgetown. The other is Dean and DeLuca, a highly-civilized hybrid of a grocery store, gourmet take-out, and cookware paradise. The place is a culinary trip around the world. Buckwheat flour, chestnut flour and chickpea flour as well as over 40 varieties of mustard say, "If you can't find what you

need here, maybe it doesn't exist." And, once you select your global goodies, you can find whatever you need to prepare them, from microscopic molds to super-size stockpots.

The produce selection looks like a sculpture garden, and the prepared foods are a vision. Favorites include the grilled chicken salad – perfectly moist chicken, with celery, walnuts and fried sage – and also the golden shell gnocchi with artichoke hearts, shallots and sun-dried tomatoes. Dean and DeLuca is just one of several gourmet groceries in the D.C. area – the kind of places that make every recipe a possibility – and if you can't find what you need to make this month's Bon Appetit cover dish, you can always carry out. The others I've found are Eatzi's, Sutton Place Gourmet, Fresh Fields and Trade Joe's. Eatzi's (even the name is fun) has signs all over its food warehouse on Rockville Pike inviting you to indulge. And you'll want to! Try the breads – I like the kinky three-chile cheese and the decadent white chocolate apricot. There are ready-made pastas, sandwiches made to order, and great desserts – crême brulee, sour cream cheesecake and sweet potato pecan pie. Too busy to cook? Pick up some honey-glazed chicken, pesto salmon or onion-crusting fresh fish. Drop a bottle of wine in the "chill-o-matic," a device which refrigerates wine in less than five minutes – and you've got dinner on the go.

Sutton Place Gourmet is like an upper crust version of Eatzi's – and "very, very" delicious! With fresh, succulent cold shrimp as big as your fist, a salad bar with French lentils and sweet potato salad with currants and cranberries, I'm thinking, "Dorothy, we are definitely not in Kansas anymore." I've made tortes with their imported white chocolate, jambalaya with their andouille sausage, and even snuck in a truffle or two. But there's so much more to try, and I'm going to make sure I sample the orzo with roasted eggplant and pine nuts, the Roquefort and wild mushroom stuffed chicken breast, and, if there's room, a charming dessert called "chocolate delight for one."

Fresh Fields/Whole Foods Market is perhaps the most down-to-earth of all these grand grocers, but no less tasty. Everything at Fresh Fields is, well, fresh. They always have slender, tender haricot verts, snappy snap peas, and tons of fresh herbs. The cheese selection is first rate – try the asiago fresco – and the orange-sesame

chicken tenders meant for kids are something I can't resist.

Finally, Trader Joe's takes Costco upmarket. There is no prepared food or carryout, but there's lots of organic stuff, and the prices are great. The frozen latkes taste like your grandma made them, and the frozen appetizers are wonderful for an impromptu cocktail party.

Now, even though I did redo my kitchen, don't think for a moment that I've spent the whole year cooking at home. I know how to make reservations as well as the next gal.

D.C. Coast is my favorite restaurant in the District. Walk in, and you're greeted by a sculpture of a giant mermaid, a fitting greeting to the restaurant's understated drama. High ceilings and huge windows surround the dining room and its elevated curved bar. If you want to look, sit on the main floor; if you want to be looked at, head upstairs to a dining room behind plate glass windows. No matter where you sit, you're going to love: the crispy Chinese lacquered duck in Peking pancake with hoisin and scallions; the panko crisp Portobello mushroom and arugula salad dressed with lemon and parmesan; and the whole Hong Kong style crispy striped bass. This was the kind of meal that just kept topping itself, course after course.

When my husband's boss came to town, Kinkead's was our choice. I liked the idea of supporting an independent restaurateur; such places make a city singular and real. Kinkead's restaurant does not disappoint. The décor is Frank Lloyd Wright with a splash of fun. There are lots of different rooms, providing more intimacy and opportunity for quiet conversation than those restaurants with airplane hangar settings. Kinkead's is a perfect place to enjoy a fabulous dinner. Some examples: seafood ravioli with fennel cream; Virginia ham with potatoes, melted leeks and red pepper oil; roasted onion and mushroom tart with crumbled goat cheese, frisee, and sherry mustard vinaigrette; and applewood smoked bacon monkfish with pomme Anna, roasted cauliflower, chanterelle mushrooms and fava beans. Hmmm, I wish the boss would come to town more often.

Closer to home, the best of Bethesda is an easy choice. Persimmon is tops. A small, cozy storefront decked out in warm shades of coral and gold, the food is artfully presented and

tastes as good as it looks. On my last visit, I had butternut squash soup garnished with gingersnap – it was almost as good as dessert. Next course was a fennel and arugula salad topped with shaved pecorino cheese and lemon oil vinaigrette. The main course? A perfectly moist shiitake and hoisin crusted salmon filet with scallion miso broth for a flawless finish.

And what about the kids? We love the chicken in lettuce wraps at P.F. Changs, a refreshing change from the fast food our pickiest eater favors. The steamed dumplings, crab Rangoon and the cashew chicken at Cabin John's Lucky Garden are a Friday night staple, and the pizza from Pizzeria Uno reminds us of home.

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### *Don't Take My Word For It, Here's Where Some Stars Eat*

A reliable source tells us that the Clintons love D.C.'s Restaurant Nora, but where does Nora Pouillon herself go on a night out? She told us she's very fond of Makoto's on MacArthur Boulevard. She loves their wonderful, ever-changing tasting menu, where each course is served in a different bowl or plate. And even though Senator Barbara Mikulski would rather eat in her hometown of Baltimore, she's dined at both La Brasserie and the Monocle on Capitol Hill. Senator Paul Sarbanes had a favorite – his family's now defunct Mayflower Grill in Salisbury, MD. And local NPR radio talk show host Diane Rehm loves one of my very own favorites – Kinkead's. She also likes DeCarlo's and – Restaurant Nora! Diane Rehm for President, anyone?