



Chef Vatche Benguian is the executive chef at The Roof Terrace at the Kennedy Center.

ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

A veteran on the cooking field

A high school football career ends, paving the way for a young man to embrace his cooking talent

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

Leaning forward with his elbows propped on the dining table, chef de cuisine Vatche Benguian exudes good cheer and the sense he's seen it all in the kitchen.

A veteran of several local high-profile kitchens — including La Colline, Gerard's Place and the opening of Blue Duck Tavern, as well as working along with D.C.'s legendary Jean-Louis Palladin, who taught him about making his own vinegars and about using lemon oil — Benguian now takes on the job of cooking for the hugely popular Roof Terrace Restaurant. Think Sunday brunch, when about 300 people line up for the buffet line in its vast kitchen, and you understand the challenge.

An Armenian who fled Sudan with his family in the late 1960s, Benguian and his family spent time in Montreal before moving to Michigan, where he attended high school, hoping to become a football star. But as it happens with fate, a broken leg ended that dream, leaving the teen with his kitchen work to earn money. Coincidentally, Benguian became a great fan of TV cooking shows, specifically of Julia Child and Graham Kerr. He also helped both his mother and grandmother in the kitchen. "I was cooking at home with my mom and practicing on beef bourguignon," he says. "She was a good cook, and my grandmother was also very talented."

Fortunately, one of his high school counselors spotted the chef-in-the-making, and insisted Benguian attend the Culinary Institute of America, where he would meet an international array of chefs — and he did.

"Eugene Bernard became like a second father to me," he says, describing the illustrious chef and instructor of the Escoffier Restaurant at the Culinary Institute of America. "He was a Basque who was the chef of Quo Vadis [in New York City]. He would tell me about the celebrities who came in to eat. ... When Bernard was starting out

Do you cook at home?

Sometimes, and when I'm really in the mood, then I really cook. Mostly, I roast chicken with herbs stuffed in the cavity, drizzled with olive oil. Or pan-seared fish.

What is your comfort food?

I like grits cooked very slowly. Sometimes I like to flavor it with some bacon fat for the smokiness flavor. Or after it's cooked I like to finish it off with some good-quality butter and some kosher salt. I even like to top it off with some grated cheese.

How do you define your cooking style?

It has a strong classic background, but with a lighter modern approach with some fusion.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

in the kitchen, apparently one of his sous chefs worked for Escoffier."

It was good training for a chef, and eventually Benguian reaped the benefits, for as he reports, working in Bernard's strict European-style Escoffier kitchen for one year was the equivalent of five to six years of restaurant work elsewhere. After graduation, Bernard helped his prize student find employment at La Cote Basque in Manhattan for a year, before introducing him to Robert Greault, the then-owner of D.C.'s Le Bagatelle and La Colline restaurant on Capitol Hill.

Looking back over his career, Benguian concedes his classic French training certainly shaped how he approaches his work.

"At one point, it was taboo to do anything other than classic French cooking," he says. "Chef Alain Ducasse was my biggest influence, and I have all his books. He showed me I could do lighter cooking with different presentations and different ingredients that were forbidden in classic cooking."

Now Benguian feels free to look outside of the classic kitchen for other culinary influences, and he has built up a repertoire that includes dishes influenced by Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Asian, Italian and North African flavors and ingredients.

But when pushed to name his very

I really don't have a favorite, but if I had to choose, it would be between the Blue Duck Tavern, Beck's (Brasserie Beck) and Central (Michel Richard Central).

Do you have a signature recipe?

Not really. I have many I like, such as the bouillabaisse, choucroute and couscous. The bouillabaisse that I make has more of an Asian influence with lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves and galangal in the broth. The soup becomes lighter in taste. These ingredients enhance the overall taste.

What's in your fridge?

I have parbaked baguettes in the freezer from Whole Foods. I have eggs, artisanal cheeses and pickled vegetables to go well with cold cuts, gherkins and good mustards.

IF YOU GO Roof Terrace Restaurant & Bar (The Kennedy Center)

■ **Where:** 2700 F St. NW, Washington

■ **Info:** 202-416-8555

■ **Hours:** Open for pre-theater dining before most Concert Hall and Opera House evening performances with reservations from 5 to 8 p.m. The Kitchen Buffet Brunch is available from 11 a.m. to 1:45 p.m., by reservation.

For more on this chef, visit washingtonexaminer.com

favorite cuisine, it's classic French, hands down.

"French cooking will always be king," he says, lamenting the dearth of French food in Washington. "For me, it is about the learning of classic cooking with hundreds and thousands of techniques on how to treat fish, vegetables and meat. Yes, it's hard to learn, and you have to spend time in the kitchen and really learn. ... What I am doing here [at the Roof Terrace Restaurant] is classic cooking in a modern way."

Scott Greenberg » The Vine Guy

Paris travelogue: Part three

The next morning we were off to the ancient city of Caen and the beaches of Normandy. Rail Europe provides several convenient trains a day, and in less than two hours, we were exploring the ancient cathedrals and cobblestone alleyways. A trip by city bus out to the new Memorial de Caen (Peace Museum) put the ravages of war in perspective and set the mood for our journey the next day when our guide, Anne Marie, drove us 25 miles out of town toward the beaches.

The weather was appropriately cool and rainy — setting the stage for a solemn day. Our first stop, much to our surprise, was the German cemetery. The German plot is much smaller and more austere than its American counterpart. One headstone marker is used for every five soldiers buried here and the crosses that mark each section are black.

Anne Marie then drove us to "Bloody" Omaha Beach, where Scott's dad came ashore in the third wave of the invasion nearly 65 years before. Anne Marie took us to various parts of the beach and made that day come alive for us as she recounted, minute-by-minute, how the invasion unfolded for each section of the beachfront. After visiting the bunkers and fortified posts, it is hard to imagine what the Allied soldiers must have gone through as they stormed the beaches and made their way up the shoreline. Even our rambunctious boys were rendered speechless.

Our final stop was the American cemetery, where more than 9,000 headstones mark the location of soldiers buried on a sprawling, 172-acre memorial park overlooking Omaha Beach. The cemetery is a remarkable experience. Walking among the grave markers, perfectly aligned in neat rows, we experienced a mixture of sadness and pride, the silence broken only by the beat of the waves crashing upon the shores of the beach just yards away.

For those who want to visit Normandy but do not have time to spend the night, the Normandy Tourism Office has a wonderful tour available in which you can take an early morning train to Caen. A guide will pick you up at the station, take you to the beaches, cemetery and visitor's center, and have you back at the station in time to grab an evening train back to Paris. For details, check out their Web site at tourisme.caen.fr.

For our last day in Paris, we decided to walk the old streets of Paris. Our first stop was the Montmartre district, in the 18th Arrondissement,

which was — literally — the high point of our trip. This former (and current) artist community is home to Basilique du Sacre-Coeur (Basilica of the Sacred Heart), located on top of the 180-yard hill and is the highest point in the city. There is a funicular that you can take to the summit or you can climb the steps up to the top to take in the sweeping views of Paris and visit the neo-Baroque interior of the church. For the truly adventurous, you can climb to the top of the dome for the ultimate bird's-eye view of the city.

One guidebook inspired us to "get gently lost" in Montmartre and we did. We strolled through cobblestone streets and found lovely gardens and charming houses, and eventually stumbled into the famed Place du Tertre, a large plaza filled with outdoor cafes and artists who are ready to sketch, draw or paint your portrait. This spot brings to mind all of the famous artists — Renoir, Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso — who spent time here in the late 1800s to early 1900s, trying to scratch out a living. It's also an easy place to either enjoy a casual lunch or grab a snack as you continue to meander through the streets.

Now we were in the mood for one last run at a museum, and our visit to Montmartre inspired us to visit the Musee National Picasso, located at 5 Rue de Thorigny in the Marais district. The museum has assembled the world's largest collection of Pablo Picasso's work and has arranged them in chronological order so that you can easily see the progression of the artist's paintings and sculptures through his "periods."

To celebrate our last night in Paris, we dined at one of the most famous brasseries in the city, La Coupole, located at 102 Boulevard du Montparnasse (metro Vavin). A fixture in Montparnasse since 1927, this former coal and wood store has become the centerpiece of the district. A dedicated waiter, who is decked out in traditional Indian garb, serves the specialty of the house — curried lamb — tableside. The rest of the waiters, dressed in classic black and white attire, bustle about the restaurant with an energy that is mind-boggling. Our farewell was capped off with a sparkling candle in the profiteroles and an order of Crepes Suzette.

The next morning, after we checked in and cleared security at the airport, the boys agreed it was an awesome trip. We looked at each other in stunned silence. Mission accomplished.

