

FOOD&WINE



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Michael Soper is the executive chef at Union Street Public House in Alexandria.

Cooking on his own terms

After a long, storied career, chef Michael Soper enjoys his successes and his role

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

When the restaurant Soper's on M in Washington closed about 10 years ago, it seemed one of D.C.'s great chefs dropped out of sight, only to re-emerge briefly as executive chef at Arlington's now-defunct Gaffney's Oyster and Ale House (since relocated to Bethesda). Again, Soper went off the culinary radar.

But the good news is Executive Chef Michael Soper definitely is back in charge, this time overseeing the kitchen at Alexandria's Union Street Public House, an old-timey place down by the waterfront that draws in locals and tourists alike.

Tall, lean and walking with a slight limp, Soper comes from a line of modest chefs who eschew the limelight and earn their street credibility by dint of hard work and great cooking skills. Arriving in D.C. in the late 1960s to attend Georgetown University, Soper decided he preferred restaurant work to studies and got his first local job at Chadwick's down by Washington Harbor.

"I really enjoyed the restaurant work as a waiter and a bartender," he said. "But I got interested in cooking. It was a different era then. I contacted the Post's reviewer, Donald Dresden, about where I could get a job and he put me in touch with the Culinary Institute of America."

That was back in the mid-1970s, just when the CIA was making its name in the food world, and its year-and-a-half program gave students credit for work experience.

"I worked there in its fancy din-

What's your comfort food?

That's a tough one. Personally probably some good pasta with gravy or meat sauce cooked with a chunk of pork. Then I put ricotta cheese with it and mix it all together.

What's your approach to cooking?

It's hands-on, no cans and all fresh. You have got to get into cooking to cook. It drives me nuts to see chefs buy meat that is already broken down. Why else would you be a cook unless it's to cook? You have to derive some pleasure. I don't want to raise or catch it, but I do want to do it from scratch

How do you get your inspiration?

Most of what I do are the classics, old-time recipes that have been here so long in the mid-Atlantic region with a few changes.

Which is your favorite cuisine?

French and Italian ... but I really like the coastal cuisines where you can get fresh seafood, from New England down to the Chesapeake.

What's in your fridge?

Not counting leftovers, pickles, ketchup, mayonnaise, water, wine, vegetables, lettuces, but nothing fancy. I make dinner four to five nights a week.

ing room that served classic French food," Soper said. "To me, the best thing was I was a bit older [than fellow students], so I was more focused and the chefs were happy to impart their knowledge."

With his diploma in hand, Soper started on the first of many jobs, and he remembers his first Thanksgiving dinner when he cooked for an inn in upstate New York.

"I had 30 turkeys, and I had to break them down, roast them and make stock," he said.

Stressed and running out of time, he remembers augmenting the whipped potatoes with instant mashed potatoes for extra volume. Yes, he said, "I made many mistakes, but I learned a lot."

Fortunately, Soper was contacted by several Washingtonians with job offers, and he headed back to D.C., where for several years he was a chef at a little saloon in the West End. Serving Italian food and Soper's own hand-made pastas, the restaurant was a big hit, and it garnered a rave review by Phyllis Richman.

After that stint, Soper moved on to a modern American grill in Georgetown, where he proved his

IF YOU GO Union Street Public House

» Where: 121 S. Union St.,
Alexandria
» Info: 703-548-1785

culinary mettle by cooking and serving a flamboyant array of seafood and Southern specialties.

"We served fish, quail, and lamb racks and country ham from Kentucky," he says. "We even did a gravlax steak, grilled rare," adding that the place was a bit ahead of its time.

Now years later, and having owned his own restaurant, Soper said he can relax a bit and relish his successes. While Soper is not a culinary hotshot standing in the media's glare, he definitely can take credit for cooking and serving some of D.C.'s most interesting and creative meals.

As he concludes, "I am now here part time as executive chef," he says. "Or maybe that is chef emeritus."

Cindy Greenberg » The Vine Gal

The Vine Gal's annual holiday gift-giving guide

Pop the cork, fill your glass, sit down at your computer and finish your holiday shopping before it's time for a refill. I'm sure that the Vine Guy will provide his annual wine wish list soon and, as you know, some of the items on his list (i.e., BIG wines) can break the bank — it is a wish list, after all. Therefore, I offer the following value-oriented suggestions for the "winos" and "foodies" on your list:

"Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book 2010" (\$15), organized by "wine growing country," and "Oz Clarke's Pocket Wine Guide 2010" (\$15), organized by "A-Z of Wines, Producers, Grapes, & Wine Regions."

Both offer essentially the same wine information consisting of vintage charts, food pairing recommendations, the author's favorite wines, wine statistics (analogous to a baseball trading card) and dictionary-style listings of wine information. Their compact size makes them a great stocking stuffer or hostess gift. They even fit in a sport coat pocket, small purse or glove compartment of a car.

"Food & Wine Best of the Best Cookbook Recipes" (\$30

Don't have enough shelf space for all the cookbooks on your must-have list and can't decide which one(s) to buy? The editors of Food & Wine have cherry-picked the past year's offerings to provide the best recipes from the 25 best cookbooks of the year, running the gamut from hors d'oeuvres to dessert in one volume. The table of contents is offered in two helpful formats: by cookbook and by course. There also is an index in the back of the book for easy cross-referencing. Ingredient lists are separate and easy to read. Make-ahead instructions and helpful editor notes are peppered throughout the book. My mah-jongg and book club ladies loved the Potato, Onion and Gruyere Galette (page 170) and the lemon-lemon loaf (page 146), which have become part of my permanent recipe rotation.

The Wine Diaper (3 diaper pack \$15 at winediaper.com)

Heading out of town this holiday season and hesitant to put that special bottle in checked baggage for fear of bottle breakage and wine-stained clothing? The Wine Diaper really works. In the interest of wine science, the Greenberg boys, emulating their favorite TV show, "Mythbusters," carefully planned and executed an experiment using the Wine Diaper. They filled an empty wine bottle with water (why risk a perfectly good bottle of vino?), corked it, placed it

in a Wine Diaper as instructed on the Web site, packed it in a suitcase and then threw the suitcase, soft-side down, off our deck onto the slate patio 12 feet below. The bottle survived the journey even after multiple throws. Try the Wine Diaper to present a gift bottle, as a hostess gift or stocking stuffer. No children or wine bottles were hurt in the filming of this experiment. The same can't be said about the suitcase, however. Oops!

"THIRTY MINUTE PASTA: 100 Quick and Easy Recipes by Giuliano Hazan" (\$28)

Every busy two-career family needs a go-to cookbook that offers a variety of options during the workweek when pressed for time. Hazan has simplified the "what-do-I-make-for-dinner-tonight?" task by serving up mostly healthy recipes (there are some recipes requiring heavy cream) that have a separate, easy-to-read, short ingredient list of readily available pantry items that can be made on the fly during a hectic weeknight. Our family likes the penne with asparagus and prosciutto.

"Wine Secrets: Advice from Winemakers, Sommeliers, and Connoisseurs" by Marnie Old (\$20)

This cute little book is organized into six wine categories: basics, tasting, shopping, pairing, restaurants and at home. Each category contains six or seven subchapters that were written by a different well-known wine expert that even a novice jumping into the wine world would recognize. At the beginning of each subchapter is a short wine bio about the author, and at the end of each subchapter is "Marnie's Corner" which contributes her brief opinion on that particular topic. The book is inviting, easy to read and helps to demystify the perceived wine pretentiousness. Don't miss the subchapter on preserving leftover wine (page 162). Looks like Marnie agrees with the Vine Guy.

Worth mentioning but running out of column space: "My Two-Year-Old Eats Octopus: Raising Children Who Love to Eat EVERYTHING" by Nancy Tringali Pihó (\$17) to encourage the development of the next generation of foodies and "Home Winemaking Step by Step: A Guide to Fermenting Wine Grapes, 4th Edition" by Jon Iverson (\$18) for the do-it-yourselfer, as well as for those who want to understand the winemaking process.

What will be under the tree for the Vine Guy this year? Entirely un-wine-related slippers from L.L.Bean. His old pair are worn out from trudging to and from his cellar. Happy holiday season to all and make good use of all that time I just saved you.