



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Ghassan Jarrouj is the executive chef at Turkish eatery Agora in D.C., one of the city's hottest new restaurants.

# The path to culinary excellence

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

If you were to bump into Ghassan Jarrouj for the first time, you may well think, “Hmmm, he is a librarian or perhaps a college professor.” Chances are your first thought would not be that this sedate gentleman is the executive chef of one of Dupont Circle’s newest, hottest and busiest restaurants, the Turkish eatery Agora.

Jarrouj, a Lebanese native, brings to this kitchen more than 35 years of cooking experience, which he gained after he discovered by his 18th year that he had been bitten by the culinary bug.

“It was my mom’s home cooking” that did it, he said, adding his native town of Zahle always has been famous for its food and its restaurants.

“My parents were always entertaining,” he said, “and although I did no cooking as a child, I watched. I did work in one of the town’s restaurants. That was quite an experience.”

When he emigrated to attend college in Los Angeles, Jarrouj earned pocket money the old-fashioned way: He worked in local restaurants.

“I gained much experience between Italian, French and Lebanese restaurants. I worked as a Lebanese chef in the town of Whittier. I never attended culinary school.”

From L.A., Jarrouj moved around from kitchen to kitchen, ending up in San Francisco, where he opened his own restaurant.

“It was a Lebanese-French restaurant,” he said, “We were featured on TV, and after that, business was

**What’s your comfort food?**

Meatloaf, mashed potatoes and a good pizza. Also, sushi and tapas, anything that is a small plate. I like to taste different flavors.

**What are your kitchen essentials?**

Spices and herbs to bring out flavors. [Good] utensils, fresh ingredients and reliable purveyors.

**What’s in your fridge?**

White wine, cheeses, some fruit,

some olives, just for nibbling at night.

**Which are your favorite restaurants?**

Masa 14, Zaytinya, Zengo, Sushi Taro and Brasserie Beck

**Where is your favorite place in the world?**

Lebanon, but I don’t actually go there anymore. I actually like a nice, quiet place, like the Chianti region. No tourist areas. I love D.C.

nonstop.” (Note: That restaurant was the Phoenician.)

In a move away from the West Coast, Jarrouj also served as the personal chef for three United States ambassadors to Lebanon in Beirut from 1987 to 1996. More recently, Jarrouj moved to D.C., where he has worked as executive chef in two of Washington’s most popular Mediterranean kitchens, Neyla and Taverna Kefi. After a brief stint as executive chef of a Lebanese restaurant in North Carolina, Jarrouj now rushes around daily in Agora’s kitchens.

From the cookpot to the serving plate, Jarrouj’s food bears the stamp of Lebanese home cooking — much like the meals his mom used to make, he said.

“I don’t use too many ingredients,” he said. “I let the fresh food bring out the taste. It’s all based on simple, fresh ingredients.”

Breads are made in-house, and the Mediterranean fish, flown in fresh daily, gets a light touch: grilling with only lemon juice, olive oil

**IF YOU GO**  
**Agora**  
» **Where:** 1527 17th St. NW  
» **Info:** 202-332-6767  
» **Hours:** 5 to 11 p.m. Sunday to Thursday (late-night menu until 1 a.m.), 5 p.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday (late-night menu until 2 a.m.); brunch — 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

and seasoning.

Though many dishes on the menu are traditional, the rest are composed with Jarrouj’s own gently creative touches. His inspiration comes, he said, not from televised food shows, but by eating out and tasting different flavors and cuisines. And what does he do on his day off?

“I don’t cook at home,” he said. “On my day off, I rest, catch up, and go out and eat.”

Scott Greenberg » **The Vine Guy**

## Taking your wine with you to dinner (for Restaurant Week)

August in Washington may be hot and humid, but there are two things that I can count on. First, traffic is just a little bit lighter, and second, you can usually snag a reservation at your favorite restaurant — and next week, you can get an extra treat during Restaurant Week.

From Aug. 16 to 22, more than 200 of the area’s finest restaurants will offer three-course meals for set prices during the 16th biannual Restaurant Week. Participating restaurants will offer a three-course lunch for \$20.10 and a three-course price-fixed dinner for just \$35.10. For a complete list of restaurants taking part in the promotion, visit [washington.org/restaurantwk](http://washington.org/restaurantwk).

Many of these restaurants also will offer wine specials, so you could really save big while splurging. If you are celebrating a special occasion and have been waiting patiently to open an extraordinary bottle of wine, now might be the time to consider taking it out to dinner. But there are a few things you need to know before you show up with wine bottle in hand.

First of all, the only jurisdiction in our area that will permit patrons to bring wine into a restaurant is D.C. Restaurants in Montgomery County only can sell wine to guests that the restaurant has purchased through the county. They are strictly prohibited from allowing patrons to bring in their own wine. Restaurants in Northern Virginia have a similar policy, however, under certain circumstances, an exception can be made. For example, if the restaurant is either a private club or has a dedicated room for private functions, you may be allowed to bring your own wine in at the discretion of management. They may be required to petition Virginia’s alcohol bureau to get permission to allow private wines on-site. Understandably, most restaurants are reluctant to go through the process since it can be time-consuming and — let’s face it — they’d like you to buy their wine.

D.C. law allows patrons to bring their own wines to a restaurant at the discretion of the establishment. This is a privilege, not a right. Policies vary widely from restaurant to restaurant and even may vary at the same restaurant depending on the day of the week (some restaurants may waive their corkage fee during weekdays — see below). With that said, the District does dictate a restaurant with a standing corkage policy may not charge more than \$25 per bottle and must allow a two-bottle minimum.

Now that you know where you can take your wine, let’s talk eti-

quette. I suggest you always call the restaurant ahead of time to let them know that you are planning on bringing in your own wine and why, e.g., a special occasion. Next, tell them the name of the wine(s) you want to bring. It is very poor form to take your wine to any restaurant where the same wine is offered on their wine list, so make sure your special wine is not one of their special wines. Lastly, confirm the restaurant’s corkage policy and pricing since both can vary widely. For example, at Charlie Palmer Steak in Washington, the standing policy is not to charge a corkage fee if you bring in a domestic bottle of wine (limit two bottles). The fee for additional bottles or any non-domestic bottle is \$25 per bottle. Fair enough.

Owner Dean Gold of Dino in Cleveland Park recently told me his restaurant is doing Restaurant Week all month long with deals that include 33 percent off of wines that cost more than \$50 on the wine list, as well as free corkage Monday through Wednesday. But I would recommend limiting your selection to one bottle, especially during Restaurant Week, when the values already are built into the menu pricing.

Lastly, I recommend you always offer a taste of the wine to both the sommelier and your server. A little kindness goes a long way, and a sip of a unique wine just might help the server forget the bottle of wine your table didn’t buy. And please, be respectful and tip your server and the sommelier generously. When you bring your wine to a restaurant, you are using their stemware and the server and/or sommelier’s time (I always try to order at least one bottle of wine off the wine list as a way of showing my appreciation).

So, when you want a special night out with that extraordinary bottle of wine you’ve been saving, just remember to call the restaurant ahead of time to get the scoop. That way, you’ll be assured of having a pleasant experience. And if you do bring your wine with you, please don’t try sending it back. That’s just mean.

