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SAMUEL CORUM/FOR THE WASHINGTON EXAMINER

Everything and the kitchen sink

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

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Fortunately for both men, de Oca is no newcomer to the kitchen. Otherwise, he would be hard-pressed to keep up with the demanding task of creating and executing inventive Asian dishes.

Because native New Yorker de Oca has done possibly every kitchen job ever devised, listening to his life story is compelling. The son of a Puerto Rican mother and an Ecuadorean father, de Oca grew up knowing and appreciating Latin flavors. In fact, his first job at the age of 14 was working as a busboy in a Mexican restaurant. He moved up slowly, going from dishwasher to line cook at an Italian eatery.

“The cook there helped me learn how to prep,” he said. “As a line cook, I did breakfasts.”

One of the restaurant’s cooks recognized a budding chef and urged de Oca to attend cooking school. He enrolled in the New York Restaurant School. After graduation, de Oca was hired by a country club kitchen on Staten Island. There he befriended a French chef named Yves Vacheresse, who complimented de Oca on his energy.

He then pointed out that de Oca did not have enough experience to even be a satisfactory line cook.

“So I started with the basics,” he said, “and I wound up doing all the grunge jobs. I did all the prep and made all the pastries

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What do you do in your leisure time?

You’ll find me taking care of the baby.

Which are your favorite restaurants?

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After learning to properly prep veggies, then moving on to managing the fish station, de Oca began his long and rather complex odyssey through assorted hotel restaurant kitchens — Ritz-Carlton, Waldorf Astoria, Algonquin Hotel and the Plaza, to name a few — and such tony restaurants as Vong in New York City.

“I learned a lot from him,” de Oca said of Vong’s chef-owner Jean-Georges Vongerichten. “What Jean-Georges was doing in New York, Susur Lee was doing in Canada.”

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But diligent de Oca — who mastered Chinese dumpling-making by learning to make dumpling dough from scratch — enjoys the daily challenge, and takes great pleasure in fusing his knowledge of French and Asian cooking to produce such dishes as caramelized black cod adorned with Cantonese preserved vegetables. All in a day’s work.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg A woman’s touch — Helfrich Riesling gets a makeover

Anne-Laure Helfrich, one of the proprietors of the Alsace wine producer that bears her surname, strikes the perfect balance between enthusiastic cheerleader for Alsace wines and a hard-driving force for change. Her mature demeanor belies her youthful 23 years. Only her angelic face gives away her true age.

Helfrich grew up immersed in a winemaking region that long has been steeped in both German and French cultures. The vineyards of Alsace, located about 300 miles east of Paris, run north to south along the Rhine river, where the valley is cradled by the eastern ridge of the Vosges Mountain range. The fertile soil varies from red and pink sandstone to chalky clay, limestone and volcanic rock. The rocky soil stresses the grapevines and forces the roots deep into the earth in search of groundwater, concentrating the flavors and increasing the acidity in the grapes.

Helfrich’s family roots also run very deep in the region. She is now the sixth generation to grow up in Alsace and the third generation to be involved in the wine trade. Like her father and grandfather before her, she held a keen interest in winemaking from an early age, working at the family winery alongside her brother, Frederic, when she was just 14.

Eager to follow in the family footsteps, Helfrich pursued advanced training in international management, earning a degree from the prestigious ESC Montpellier University in the South of France. To gain some real-world marketing experience outside of France, she spent a summer internship with a U.S. wine importer to see how Alsace wines are perceived in America. She returned to Alsace with a better perspective of what the American consumer was looking for in wines from her native region and quickly went about initiating subtle changes in the style of wines her family produced.

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sugar. The slightly off-dry wines are easy to drink. They have what she refers to as “a feminine touch.”

Evidently, I am in touch with my feminine side when it comes to the Helfrich label. Retail prices are approximate.

The Helfriches produce and import three of the varietals that Alsace is famous for — pinot gris, gewurztraminer and riesling, in two different “tiers.” Their entry-level wines, called “Noble Tier,” are priced at \$15 and are made from grapes that are sourced from vineyards in the Couronne d’Or vineyard association, while the “Grand Cru” wines are produced using grapes from the Steinklotz vineyard, one of only a handful of vineyards in Alsace that has received a “Grand Cru” designation, and are a bargain at \$25.

Don’t let the screw-cap closure on the **2009 Helfrich Noble Tier Riesling** deter you. This is a beautiful wine with sublime acidity that allows the pretty flavors of green apple and nectarine to shine on the palate. There is a hint of wet stone/slate on the finish, where the Meyer lemonade note adds a refreshing and lively finish.

One of my favorite wines to enjoy with spicier fare, particularly Indian or Thai cuisine, is gewurztraminer, and the **2009 Helfrich Noble Tier Gewurztraminer** is one reason why. Bursting with aromas of rose water, orange blossom and lychee on the nose, the wine rewards the palate with vibrant flavors of spice, nutmeg, nectarine and lychee nut. Just a hint of minerality adds depth to the long finish.

If I had to pick just one house white wine for the summer, this would be it. The balance and charm of the **2009 Helfrich Noble Tier Pinot Gris** is remarkable. The fragrant nose exudes scents of honeysuckle and apricot. The mouthfeel is lithe and bright with gorgeous flavors of ripe apple, white fig and white peach that fill the mouth. There is just a hint of honeysuckle on the slightly off-dry finish that lingers for more than a minute.

The \$25 **Helfrich Grand Cru** series includes riesling and gewurztraminer and pinot gris wines from the famous Steinklotz vineyard, one of the oldest vineyards in Alsace. While all of the Grand Cru wines are remarkable, the **2008 Helfrich Grand Cru Gewurztraminer** is my favorite of the trio, exhibiting a classic bouquet of lychee nut, roses and sweet clove. The mouth fills out with ripe apricot, more lychee fruit and sweet nectarine leading to subtle hints of banana and honey on the back end of the crisp finish.





Jaime Montes de Oca Jr. is the chef de cuisine under celebrity chef Susur Lee at Zentan in D.C.

SAMUEL CORUM/FOR THE WASHINGTON EXAMINER

Everything and the kitchen sink

By Alexandra Greeley
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