



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Billy Klein is the executive chef at D.C.'s eclectic Cafe Saint-Ex, where he cooks up unexpected dishes.

# Eclectic, creative cuisine

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

One of Washington's unsung culinary heroes, Billy Klein runs the kitchen of the somewhat eclectic Cafe Saint-Ex on 14th Street. Wearing shorts, a T-shirt and sturdy sandals, Klein could easily pass for one of the twentysomethings who hang out here.

Besides looking cool and laid-back, Klein has perfected the art of creating and serving the unexpected dish, many as cool and laid-back as he is. Take the Monte Cristo sandwich, for instance. Who might ever have thought of encrusting the egg-dipped bread in crushed Frosted Flakes before pan-grilling the sandwich? The result is a crunchy grilled cheese-and-ham treat served with sweet potato fries. Oh, and don't forget the ramekin of pure maple syrup for dunking the sandwich.

That's the sort of zany thinking that inspires Klein's cooking, far and above the sort of work he was allowed at one of his first jobs at a chain restaurant. At his next job, he was not much better off.

"I was the head line cook," he said, "but I had no idea what I was doing. I could cook meats and vegetables, and I was fine with a knife, but as for the refinements — searing, roasting, properly cooking vegetables perfectly — I had no sense of starting from scratch."

Fortunately, he didn't want that kind of diminished cooking life, because Klein's formative years were shaped by his family's love of good food, good conversations and convivial dinnertimes. All that paid off: Klein attended the Le Cordon Bleu Institute of Culinary Arts in Pittsburgh and was later mentored by Brian Bennington (who opened

## What's your comfort food?

I really enjoy a good burger when I need something to feel good and fulfilled. Or when I cook for myself when I come here, I make one with mushrooms, liver mousse and prosciutto.

## What's basic for your kitchen pantry?

Good salt, fresh herbs, lemons, which are as important as salt in cooking. A simple dribble of juice brightens flavors. Then fresh everything else. As long as it is fresh in front of me, I can make something delicious.

## What's in your fridge?

Not a whole lot. Orange juice, eggs, cheese, bread, butter, yogurt and barbecue sauce.

## Which is your favorite restaurant?

The Oval Room. I identify with the chef's style of cooking. I've been there three times. Fruit comes up a lot in his cooking, as a balance of acid and sugar. Then Trio and Palena Cafe.

## What's your favorite location?

I haven't seen a lot, but I would probably say the beach anywhere with warm saltwater, the air, smells and sounds.

the now-closed Cynthia's in Severna Park), who allowed young Klein to create menus and experiment in the kitchen.

"Chef Brian took me from a young culinarian and made me a chef," he says.

That life-shaping job was at the Ann Arbor Yacht Club, which Klein calls one of the best jobs he's ever had.

But his life is going along pretty well now. A native Baltimorean who has relocated to D.C. — this is the job he has always been looking for, he says — Klein has shaped the menu to fit his quirky palate and food passions.

He describes his signature dish as the roast chicken.

"I get the chickens from Path Valley Farms, an Amish farm known for its naturally raised poultry," he said. "That's brined and served with legs and thighs that are made into chicken croquettes."

He composes its sauce from the chicken stock.

## IF YOU GO Cafe Saint-Ex

» Where: 847 14th St. NW

» Info: 202-265-7839

» Hours: 5 p.m. to close Monday; 11 a.m. to 1:30 a.m. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday; 11 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. Friday and Saturday

"The whole chicken gets used in this dish," he said. This dish, he points out, has not changed in two years. That speaks volumes about its customer appeal.

All that goes to explain how he defines his cooking style: "Everything comes into what I do," he said. "There's no country of origin. I get inspiration from everywhere. A really good burrito might turn into an entree that resembles a burrito. I highlight what's best from the farms."

## The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

# The remarkable Rieslings of St. Urbans-Hof

The Mosel River winds its way through the heart of France and Germany on its northerly course toward Koblenz, Germany, where it joins the Rhine River. Along the way, some of the most prestigious vineyards envelop the slopes of the bucolic valleys as they cradle the banks of the Mosel. The region's cool Continental climate — with some maritime influence from the nearby Atlantic Ocean and a steep-hilled topography veined with slate soil — is ideal for growing great riesling grapes along the Mosel and its famous tributaries, the Saar and Ruwer.

Small picturesque towns and medieval hamlets line the river like pearls on a string. One of the most beautiful towns in this region is Leiwen, an 18th-century village so quaint that it looks as if it were plucked from a fairy tale. It is here that you will find the winemaking Weis family, whose vineyard holdings date back more than 200 years.

The Weis family long has understood the importance of this region, embracing the idea that wines are made in vineyards, not in the winery, lab or cellars. This knowledge, coupled with the goal of creating top-quality wines, spurred them to acquire prime land through purchases and the old-fashioned method: marriage. Although the original vineyards had belonged to the Weis family for centuries, Nicolaus Weis was the first to build a winery on the outskirts of Leiwen in 1947. He named his estate for the patron saint of German winemakers, St. Urban, and "hof" (the German word for "estate"), ergo, St. Urban's Estate.

In the 1960s, his son Hermann assumed management of all operations. During Hermann's tenure, the nursery expanded to become one of Germany's largest. He established a reputation as a world-recognized vine breeder, especially noted for his work with riesling. In the 1970s, he pioneered the use of the riesling varietal in Canada, planting the first large parcel of vines in the Niagara Peninsula under the title of St. Urban Vineyard. Even though he was intrigued by Canada, Hermann continued purchasing top Mosel and Saar vineyards in Germany, including sites in the high-level villages of Piesport, Ockfen and Wiltingen.

In 1997, Hermann's son Nik, who had just completed winemaking school in Geisenheim, joined the winery and took over management of his family's estate. Since then, Nik has been focused on producing superior wines that reflect the true character of the Mosel. Today, St. Urban-Hof has 82 acres of riesling,

including three vineyards in each of the Middle-Mosel and Saar regions, the foundation for some of the finest single-vineyard wines.

The winery exports to international markets and enjoys a worldwide reputation for exceptional Riesling wines. Retail prices are approximate.

In a successful effort to produce a brilliant entry-level Riesling that reflects the typical character of the Mosel region, Nik sourced grapes from neighboring vineyards to produce the **2008 St. Urbans-Hof "Urban" Riesling (\$12)**. Floral aromas combine with spicy notes of nectarine on the nose. Flavors of stone fruit nicely counter the characteristic slate minerality found on the crisp finish.

The cool climate and shorter daylight hours stress the vines and force them to "struggle," producing grapes that concentrate the characteristics of the terroir. The result is evident in the **2008 St. Urbans-Hof Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Kabinett (\$16)**. The Kabinett designation lets you know that the grapes were harvested at "normal" ripeness and the wines are on the drier side. The wine is bright and crisp, showing a touch of tropical fruit upfront with a light citrus and slate finish. The abundant acidity keeps it fresh and focused.

The slate-filled vineyards retain the heat of the sun for the vine roots and the reflection of the sun off of the river feeds the vine leaves, producing grapes that ripen over a very long harvest. The **2007 St. Urbans-Hof Ockfener Bockstein Riesling Spatlese (\$25)** takes full advantage of this, because the grapes are harvested later than the traditional Kabinett grapes. The floral bouquet features citrus blossom notes and a flinty scent. The slightly sweet palate explodes with tropical fruit, pineapple and honey. The high acidity keeps the finish drier than expected and incredibly crisp.

Another peculiarity is that the Hunsruck and Eifel mountains hem in the river valleys of the Mosel. The cool air that flows into the valleys at night chills the grapes and contributes to the intensity of fruit and development of acidity, resulting in concentrated aromas and flavors. This phenomenon is known as "diurnal" swing, and nowhere is this more evident than in the **2007 St. Urbans-Hof, Piesporter Goldtropfchen Riesling Auslese (\$60)**. The term "Auslese" means the grapes have been hand-harvested late in the season and are very ripe. Surprisingly, this wine is more rich than sweet on the palate, with loads of peach nectar and nectarine on the front and hints of Key Lime on the lingering finish.

