



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Michael Costa took over for "Top Chef" contestant Mike Isabella at Zaytinya in D.C.

## Chef takes center stage at Zaytinya

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Stepping into the limelight of sorts, Michael Costa is now the head chef at the ever-busy, ever-popular Mediterranean tapas restaurant Zaytinya. Costa, who replaced "Top Chef" star Mike Isabella, has moved in with great ease and enthusiasm.

"Jose [Andres] has always been an influence on me," he says. "I used to go to Jaleo and fell in love with the food there. I had met Mike Isabella when he was on 'Top Chef.' It's a great restaurant group."

Now as part of the culinary team surrounding Andres, Northern Virginia native Costa has hunkered down to do what he loves best in life: cook.

"My mom with tell you that when I was 3 or 4 years old," he said, "I was baking and cooking."

Years later, as a college student at the University of Virginia, he kept asking his professors not about class work necessarily, but about exotic cooking. That's when he realized that maybe he needed to pursue a different career path after graduation.

And he did just that. With a move to Texas to spend time with his family, Costa attended night classes at a local culinary school, the El Centro College in Dallas, from which he earned an associate's degree in applied science, culinary arts.

"I enrolled out of curiosity," he said, "and I got a scholarship from the National Restaurant Association."

He was mentored there by the culinary school's Greek founder, Costas "Gus" Katsigris, who help to develop Costa's ensuing love for Greek and Mediterranean foods and flavors — something that guides him well in his job at Zaytinya.

"He is a nice guy," Costa said about Katsigris. "He wrote the textbook on

### What's your comfort food?

Country French. We ate that growing up. Also Vietnamese pho.

### What is your cooking philosophy?

To me, it's all about the ingredients, especially in Greek cooking. I love to use modern techniques, but only to make a dish better: I work with a lot of local farmers. I get great local garlic from Pennsylvania.

### What is your favorite cuisine?

American. Hamburgers nicely done.

### Which is your favorite restaurant?

Palena is up there. Pollo Rico does chicken the best. Jaleo, Zaytinya. My wife and I came here on our third date.

### What's in your fridge?

Greek white wine from Santorini, mineral water, cheese.

kitchen equipment."

After graduation, Costa worked at the Dallas restaurant Abacus, owned by chef Kent Rathbun.

"I called the chef every day for two months, and finally got the job," he said, adding Rathbun is a James Beard-nominated chef. Once hired, Costa worked at Abacus for one and a half years.

When Costa decided to leave Dallas and return to the D.C. area, he went to work for Michel Richard at Michel Richard Citronelle, where he became the restaurant's private dining chef. Richard got young Costa a cooking job in Paris, at the Michelin-starred Michel Rostang Restaurant, where he lived and cooked for six months before returning to the United States and signing on with Baltimore's Cindy Wolf, part owner of Pazo with Tony Foreman.

While under Costa's direction, Pazo received a 3 1/2-star review from the Baltimore Sun and earned a three-star rating from the Mobile Travel Guide. Because of his work at Pazo, Costa was nominated for "Chef of the Year" by the Maryland Restaurant Association in 2010. And working at Pazo had another benefit: "I met Mike Isabella through mutual

### IF YOU GO Zaytinya

- » **Where:** 701 Ninth St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-638-0800
- » **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday to Monday, 11:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to midnight Friday and Saturday; Brunch — 11:30 to 2:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

friend and "Top Chef" contestant Jesse Sandlin, who was my sous chef at Pazo," he said.

Now that he has taken over the kitchen at Zaytinya and stepped into Isabella's shoes, Costa sees menu formation is definitely a collaborative effort.

"I must keep the food consistent," he said. "This is one of the most popular places in D.C. ... When a dish is ready, we let Jose taste it, comment and fine-tune it," he added, pointing to his very thick notebook of recipes with commentary jottings in the margins.

"It's a dream to work for Jose," he said.

## The Vine Gal » Cindy Greenberg

# Cookbooks and wine gadgets: A gift guide for your foodie

Thanksgiving is a day devoted to spending time with family and friends. The day after Thanksgiving is devoted to buying gifts for family and friends. If you're wondering what to get the wine lover or budding chef in your life, have no fear. Here is a list of cookbooks and wine gadgets that every gourmand will love.

**Cooking for Geeks - Real Science, Great Hacks, and Good Food by Jeff Potter (\$35) published by O'Reilly** - This is the perfect holiday gift for the twenty-something math and science geek in your life who might be a little intimidated in the kitchen since it demystifies the art of cooking by explaining it in science terms, much like a lab experiment. It has charts, graphs and even a flow chart (how to cook pizza) to translate cooking theories into scientific notation. Recipes are used to enforce the cooking concepts and cooking oriented interviews are included with science minded individuals, such as Adam Savage from "Mythbusters." Don't worry — this book expects you to think outside the box and be creative as well, and no special equipment is required. No rolling pin? Substitute a wine bottle.



**The Cookie Party Cookbook by Robin L. Olson (\$19)** - I don't know about you but I love a good cookie. It is my definition of a perfect treat — small in size, big in flavor, has texture and satisfies the sweet-tooth craving with the added bonus of serving a few and freezing the remainder for later snacking. Baking cookies as gifts for friends, neighbors, and office parties is a holiday tradition. Unfortunately, it is also a time-consuming labor of love. Robin Olson's fun solution is a Cookie Exchange party, which she has been doing for years. Everything you need to know to host your own — or to be a responsible participant in one — is explained in this book along with the classic, international, and bars and tartlets recipes that are sure to be your new favorites. Mine? Rolo cookies, Russian torte, and lemon bars.

**Chevy Goopy Crispy Crunchy Melt-In-Your-Mouth Cookies by Alice Medrich (\$26)** - What's not to love about that title? OMG! Cookies are my weakness and this cookbook will keep me baking throughout the winter months. There are a number of recipes that are wheat-free or dairy-free. Many recipes have suggested "upgrades" — variations to enhance the end product such as a dusting of

freshly ground nutmeg.

**Quinoa 365 by sisters Patricia Green and Carolyn Hemming (\$30)** - Are you looking to make a healthful dietary change next year? Though not technically a grain — it is actually related to spinach and beets — quinoa can substitute for nearly any grain in cooking. It is rich in protein, iron, and various minerals and is also an excellent source of dietary fiber. I tried a sampling of the recipes from this book that were all well received by my picky family. Additionally, I have been covertly sneaking the superhealthy quinoa flour into our meals and they haven't even noticed.

**The Dirty Life On Farming, Food, and Love by Kristin Kimball (\$25)** - Not everyone has the strength to throw in the towel on their old "Sex and the City" lifestyle and start anew ala "Green Acres," but that is exactly what Kristin Kimball did. Out with

the designer duds and in with the jeans and back-breaking labor. We all have days, now and then, when we fantasize about simplifying our life and getting back to nature. Kristin shows us that this transition is not as simple as it seems. It takes creativity, strength and a lot of patience. A vicarious way to get back to nature.

**A number of wine gadgets by Trudeau** - I don't know about you but I frequently have a difficult time unscrewing the screw cap from wine bottles. Trudeau makes a handy gadget called simply **Wine Bottle Screw Cap Remover (\$10)**. It does just that, yet allows one the feeling of ceremony of "opening" a bottle ... minus the "pop." It'll come in handy for folks who have difficulty gripping because of arthritis, etc.

Did you forget to open the bottle to breathe? Try their **Aerating Pourer (\$25)**. It introduces air to the wine as you pour making decanting by the glass simple. Just insert the aerator into the bottle and pour. When finished, rinse with hot water. The spill collar removes easily for cleaning.

**Trulever Corkscrew and foil cutter (\$60)** - It is sleek in design and lightweight with a smooth gliding action upon use. The foil cutter fits a wide range of bottle sizes.

In my experience, wine buckets frequently leave condensation drips, rings, or puddles when used depending upon ambient room temperature. The **Wine Chiller (\$35)** has a modern, contemporary design and reusable gel packs that are placed inside the container to avoid condensation.