



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Justin Bittner, the executive chef at Bar Pilar, creates bold flavors out of a cramped kitchen.

## Giant flavor, mini kitchen

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

**F**inding a chef who is ruggedly determined to be unconventional and who can make sense out of an overstocked miniature kitchen is rather refreshing. Executive chef Justin Bittner at Bar Pilar is so unconventional he would probably just shrug, say “whatever,” and wear sandals and cutoffs to work in mid-January.

You’ll find that his small-plates menu fits his persona perfectly: bold flavors, quirky pairings, such as roasted pork shoulder with a garlic trencher; grilled octopus with arbequina olive oil; and a killer chicken liver pate with grilled bread. For a real peek into the inner workings of Bittner’s persona, however, ask nicely for a kitchen visit. There, in an improbable tour de force, Bittner pulls off the cleverest space arrangement, allowing four grown men to work in a 6-foot area lined by at least 20,000 different ingredients and cooking utensils.

While talking about his pigs’ ears appetizers and his passion for pork shoulder, Bittner summarizes his culinary experience thus: “I am not sure if I like the cooking or just being out late at night,” he says. But all joking aside, he explains that he grew up in Baltimore as the son of parents who love to cook and who also own a 200-acre farm in Pennsylvania.

“Food was always being made,” he said. “But I was not processed or fast food. ... But I cannot pinpoint exactly why I cook now.”

From high school, Bittner went on to attend culinary school in Philadelphia, and learned, to his chagrin, that young cooking students feel with their new set of skills that they can cook

### What is your comfort food?

Beer. It really all depends. If I am here, a fried egg and bacon sandwich. At home, it’s a mac and cheese casserole with tomatoes, cheddar cheese, and ground beef. Then, soup and chili.

### What is your cooking philosophy?

Simplicity. We don’t have anything complicated on the menu. I focus on technique, proper seasonings. If you source ingredients well, you don’t have to do anything to them.

### Where is your favorite place in the

better than they actually can.

“That’s what happened to me,” he said. “I worked in Spain and that opened my eyes. I didn’t learn a thing in culinary school that was relevant to the real world. You have to do so many things at one time, a real multitasker.”

After culinary school, Bittner worked in Baltimore for a hotel banquet kitchen before being offered his current job. That was four years ago, when he was just 26. In that time, he confesses, he has learned that it was really hard being a chef.

“You had to make the rules,” he said. “It was really paralyzing to come up with menu ideas. I worried about screwing up.”

Then Bittner slipped into a discourse on the glories of his brined-then-fried pigs’ ears. He introduced them to the menu, he said, because when he sees a dish on another menu and if it is unfamiliar, he sets out to learn all about it. But for such cuisines as Ethiopian and Thai, learning their kitchen tricks “would ruin it for me,” he said.

### world?

Andalucia, Seville and Barcelona. I also like being on the farm with my four-wheeler. And I really like San Francisco.

### Which is your favorite restaurant?

A tossup between Komi and Chez Panisse. I enjoy Momofuku in New York. Then Palena, 2 Amys, Sushi Taro. I usually eat some of my dishes out here so I get the real experience of what it’s like.

### What’s in your fridge?

Beer and hot sauce. I don’t really have food.

### IF YOU GO Bar Pilar

- » **Where:** 1833 14th St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-265-1751
- » **Hours:** Dinner — 5 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Monday to Thursday, 5 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Sunday

“That takes all the mystery out of it,” he said, adding that he rarely sits down to eat, standing up instead with his apron on.

As for inspiration, Bittner says he flips through the pages of his nearly two tons’ worth of cookbooks, to see what chefs like Thomas Keller and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall are doing. But the most likely source of his cooking creations must come from some inner recess of his persona, that place where he can figure out how to make pigs’ ears palatable.

## The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

# The wine year in review

**A**s the year draws to a close, I realize how incredibly fortunate I am to be a wine journalist. It is truly an amazing experience. This past year, I have had the good fortune to meet so many incredible people associated with the wine trade — from winemakers, vineyard owners and producers to public relations professionals and media personalities. I have also had the remarkable opportunity to taste a lot of wine. Some good, some not so good and a few that were so fantastic, they, as I am fond of saying, curled my toes.

Each year I try to write one column about the best wine experience of the year. Unfortunately — or maybe very fortunately — looking back, it occurs to me that there was not just one noteworthy event, but, indeed, several. Best of all, most of these affairs involved friends, both inside and outside of the wine trade, but who are all as enthusiastic about wine as I am.

I hope that I will be as lucky next year during my wine-themed adventures to experience even half of the grape-based gems I did this year. Here is a brief overview of some of the highlights from 2010. Retail prices, if applicable, are approximate.

I blame my friend Jim for introducing me to the world of wine several years ago. Jim’s contagious passion about wine — along with his well-stocked cellar — has led me down a path I have never regretted — at least, not until I get the bill from the wine shop. The only other two things that Jim is just slightly more passionate about than wine are his family and the New Orleans Saints football team. So it came as no great surprise that when the Saints came marching into the Super Bowl, Jim threw a party and went deep — very, very deep — into his cellar for the occasion. He opened a bottle of **1998 d’Arenberg The Dead Arm Shiraz from the McLaren Vale region of Australia (\$65)** to pair with his chef/brother’s gumbo and to celebrate his hometown team’s win.

When you are invited to a high-end wine dinner, it doesn’t hurt to own your own wine shop. After all, you simply have to peruse your inventory to find something that will pair well with the food while attempting to steal the show and put the other contributions to shame. My friend Rick did just that. Staying in the southern end of

the Rhone Valley, he brought along a bottle of **2000 Chateau de Beaucastel Chateaufort du Pape Hommage a Jacques Perrin (\$400)**. The special bottling is named in honor of the family patriarch and is only produced in exceptional years. While the wine is relatively unique because it is made from organically farmed fruit, it is also distinctive for its composition of 13 grape varietals, including mourvedre and grenache. No matter what you call it, make sure you call me when you open a bottle of this amazing wine.

If I could only taste one champagne a year, I would definitely save my palate for the **1985 Krug Champagne from Reims, France (\$350)**, since it would probably take me that long just to save up for a bottle of the vintage bubbly. Happily, I did not have to spend my wine budget since I was the lucky guest of a dear friend who invited me to meet a friend of his, renowned author Michael Gelb, for dinner. Michael can only be described as a modern-day philosopher on a sugar buzz. He was in town to promote his latest book, “Wine Drinking for Inspired Thinking,” and there was no better way to get inspired than with the nuanced flavors of toasted hazelnuts and brioche and the perfect balance of bubbles and minerals found in a bottle of Krug that night.

Wine does not have to be expensive to make a lasting impression. One of my most memorable wine experiences this year came when my wife and I were having dinner in a small Thai restaurant in Park City, Utah. We discovered the **2006 Willm Riesling from the Alsace region of France (\$12)** on the menu and decided to give it a try, and we’re glad we did. The just off-dry (whisper-sweet) frame supported beautifully balanced flavors of lychee, pineapple and minerals. The bright acidity was a pitch-perfect foil for the flavorful cuisine, and the dramatic backdrop of the Wasatch mountain range made the entire experience delightful.

And finally, there were the monthly neighborhood poker games, which is nothing more than a thinly veiled excuse to get together with the guys and drink wine. “Value” is always the theme with this group, and the best one this year was the **2007 WH Smith Pinot Noir from the Sonoma Coast of California (\$29)**, an elegant and charming wine that takes the sting out of losing every now and then — OK, maybe more often.

