



Argentinean chef Guillermo Pernot spices it up at Cuba Libre.

ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Talented chef brings Latin flair

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

An Argentinean cooking Cuban food in Washington, D.C.?

If that seems puzzling, consider that chef-partner Guillermo Pernot is married to a Cuban and he has successfully launched the highly themed Cuba Libre Restaurant & Rum Bar here and in Orlando, Atlantic City and Philadelphia. On top of that, Pernot deserves credit for introducing Nuevo Latino cooking in Pasion!, his Philadelphia restaurant.

Despite the color and passion of his cooking — to say nothing of all his awards, including his two James Beard Awards for “Best Chef of the Mid-Atlantic Region” and for “Best Single Subject Cookbook” — Pernot seems a serious and sober chef, as devoted to fine cooking as an adult as he was when learning the culinary ropes from his grandmothers.

“Even as a child I cooked with both my grandmothers,” he said. “One day, I decided to make a cake. I used three dozen eggs. It was a disaster.”

That early kitchen experimenting certainly laid the groundwork for his eventual career. Although Pernot did not attend culinary school, he did stay in the restaurant business, working for several years in the front of the house.

“I always wanted to be involved in food,” he said. “I started doing dinners for a bed-and-breakfast in Glen Mills. Then it was breakfasts and dinners. Suddenly, I started getting great reviews. I thought, ‘I can do this.’”

With his career started, Pernot started working in several pizza and pasta restaurants before moving to Miami, which he calls “a restaurant mecca.” While there, he cooked in Gloria Estefan’s Latin restaurant, Allioli, in South Beach. Pernot returned to Philadelphia when his Cuban wife balked at living in Miami. After a short stint in a hotel’s restaurant,

What is your cooking philosophy?

To keep it simple and to let the ingredients speak for themselves. You send a clear message with the food. We have very honest food without weird sauces. You want fish on a plate? Just put it on.

What is your comfort food?

I crave steak, pasta with tomato sauce, stir-fry with very spicy chilies. Food is just something you need. That’s why on our menu I cover many varieties.

Where do you get your inspiration?

I think and read a lot. Sometimes things don’t work and I will redo it until I get it right. But you cannot force it.

What do you do in your leisure time?

I don’t have much, except maybe sleeping.

What’s in your fridge?

Carrots for the dog, diced carrots with olive oil. I have leftover picadillo. Always rice, eggs and lots of fruit.

IF YOU GO Cuba Libre

- » **Where:** 801 Ninth St. NW, Suite A (corner of Ninth and H streets)
- » **Info:** 202-408-1600
- » **Hours:** Lunch — 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday to Friday; Dinner — 5 to 11 p.m. daily; Late dinner — 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. Friday and Saturday; Weekend brunch — 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Pernot started his own, a place called Vega Grill.

“It just took off,” he said. The Vega Grill earned him Food & Wine magazine’s title as one of “America’s Ten Best New Chefs.”

That led him to his triumphant restaurant, Pasion!, a Nuevo Latino place where Pernot used Cuban seasonings and his creativity to great advantage. According to the New York Times, says Pernot, Pasion! was considered one of the top restaurants in the world.

“It won two James Beard Awards and I was named ‘Chef of the Year’ by Esquire magazine,” he said. It was

at this juncture in his career that the owners of Cuba Libre invited him to open one of their restaurants in Philadelphia; now he oversees the kitchens and menus in all four locations.

His signature dishes in the Orlando and Washington locations include five different ceviches and desserts.

“I’m excited about our menu,” he said, “because we added a selection of ceviches and piqueos (small tastings) that are exclusive to Washington, D.C. We did some research before we opened, and found that Washingtonians love small plates. These flavorful dishes are fun and perfect for sharing with family and friends.”

And for dessert: a Cuban flan, a banana tres leches cake and dulce de leche ice cream.

And just what are Cuban seasonings? As he explains, he found both African and Chinese influences in Cuban cooking, so he started playing around with multiple seasonings and ingredients, with an emphasis on using culantro (a West Indian herb similar to cilantro) and calabaza squash. Whenever he needed some guidance, he acknowledged, he turned to his mother-in-law.

And just who does the cooking at home? His Cuban wife.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Back in the saddle with Saddleback Cellars wine

If you have been hanging out in Napa Valley as long as Nils Venge, you might get a bit saddle sore — or at the very least, somewhat jaded. But then again, if you loved doing what you do as much as Nils, you’d probably be happy to just keep getting back on your proverbial horse, vintage after vintage, and keep the grape rodeo going.

As a fan of California wines, I have seen a lot of winemakers come and go — or at least fade away after one or two successful vintages. Rare, indeed, is the producer who can, year after year, make great wines on a consistent basis. I first met Nils, a 6-foot-something, broad-shouldered blonde of Danish descent who fancies himself a modern-day cowboy, about six years ago. I was amazed at how dependable his wines were and asked him what his secret was. He replied that he looks at vintages like riding a horse at a rodeo; “You never know what horse you’ll draw, but you have to get to know that horse pretty darn quick and learn how to stay on.” And stay on he has.

Nils was destined to ride vintages. His father owned and operated a wine, beer and spirits distributorship in Los Angeles. After Nils finished high school, he decided to learn more about the wine end of the business, so he enrolled at the University of California-Davis, where he earned his undergraduate degree in viticulture with a minor in enology. After a stint in the Vietnam War, he headed up to Napa to pursue his love of wine. In 1976, Nils and his father-in-law purchased the property now known as Saddleback Cellars in Oakville. But it was his time as general manager and winemaker at Groth Vineyard (1982-93), where he was a minority partner; that really started his career. Nils’ 1985 Groth Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve was the first California wine to receive a perfect score of 100 points from wine critic Robert Parker Jr. After that, Nils’ talents were in great demand.

Today, Saddleback has about 15 acres planted to cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, merlot, pinot blanc, pinot grigio and zinfandel. Even though Nils is often referred to as “The King of Cabernet,” he would rather be known as just a fun-loving winemaker who is dedicated to making wines — for both Saddleback and other wineries throughout Napa Valley — that take advantage of the best qualities of every unique vintage, whether it is a single vineyard or a blend of appellations. But of all Nils’ remarkable

accomplishments, I think the one he is most proud of is his son, Kirk, who is a remarkably talented winemaker in his own right.

On a recent trip to Napa, Cindy and I had the opportunity to sit down with Nils and Kirk and taste some of their wines. Retail prices are approximate.

If you’re looking for something to quench your thirst on a hot day, the **2008 Saddleback Cellars Pinot Grigio (\$24)** is about as close to a wine fire extinguisher as you’ll find. The floral bouquet shows off scents of green apple and honeysuckle while the crisp acidity keeps the flavors of apple, nectarine and citrus bright and refreshing in the mouth. The long, creamy finish is courtesy of aging the wine on the lees in neutral French oak barrels.

The **2008 Saddleback Cellars Chardonnay (\$26)** delivers a lot of wine for the money, starting with a nose that features aromas of ripe apple, pear and buttered toast. Flavors of apple, pear and Myer lemon are supported by a creamy mouthfeel. The medium-bodied finish boasts enough acidity to stand up to richer shellfish and seafood.

Nils has been making zinfandel since 1992, and he puts his institutional knowledge to work in the **2007 Saddleback Cellars Old Vine Zinfandel (\$36)**. The fruit comes from two old-vine vineyards whose average age is over 100 years old. Scents of red cherry and spices swirl in the bouquet. The full-bodied frame supports jammy flavors of blackberry, raspberry and black pepper up front, while notes of cedar and vanilla fill in on the big finish.

A roaring fire and glass of the **2006 Saddleback Cellars Merlot (\$36)** is all I need on a cold winter’s night. The warm aromas of dark plum, black cherry and black raspberry on the nose lead to beautifully layered flavors of black cherry, cassis, blackberry and cocoa in the mouth. Just a touch of melted licorice rounds out the long, lush finish.

Of course, no review of Saddleback wines would be complete without cabernet sauvignon, and the **2005 Saddleback Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon (\$54)** is as good as it gets. Aromas of blackberry, cassis and cedar dominate the fragrant bouquet. Ripe black fruit — black plums and blackberries — sit on a well-balanced frame with smooth tannins and pitch-perfect acidity. Notes of cedar, cocoa and roasted coffee linger on the supple finish.

