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ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

AGAINN: Again and again

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

A native of Syracuse, N.Y., Mike Sindoni — the recently appointed executive chef of D.C.'s deluxe British Isles restaurant and Scotch bar, AGAINN — has always loved food. "Eating was always a big deal," he said of family mealtimes. "I'm one of six kids, so we always had big family dinners. I still cook when I visit home."

Enrolling in Johnson & Wales Culinary Arts program, Sindoni spent his sophomore year abroad, studying in Florence, Italy, and decided his goal was to get a job in Italy after he graduated. "A friend was doing a study program there," he said, "so I decided to tag along. I went into a Florence restaurant, Il Cibreo, and said I would work for free."

Perhaps a real turning point in his culinary career, the volunteer job was, says Sindoni, a lesson in hard work. "It was a 15-hour day of prep work," he says. "It was a good first real restaurant to work in. Everything was made from scratch daily." He recalls how the walk-in refrigerator was always empty at the beginning of each day, except for prosciutto and Parmesan cheese.

On a second trip to Italy, Sindoni worked briefly at a farm, Tenuta di Spannocchia, in Siena, where he was taught how to butcher pigs and to prepare traditional sausages and salumi. "That was a great starting point," he reminisced.

What is your comfort food?

Oh, man. Pizza definitely. In D.C., you can find good pizza, such as Seventh Hill Pizza and We the Pizza.

What has been the greatest influence on your cooking?

Being in Italy and travel in general. And going to New York one day just to eat.

What is your key ingredient?

Salt, if I had to pick one. You can't do much without it.

Which is your favorite place in the world?

Really hard to pick one place. The top five would be San Francisco, New York City, London, Siena and Washington.

What's in your fridge?

Beer, white wine, kim chee and cheese. That's pretty much it.

IF YOU GO AGAINN

» **Where:** 1099 New York Ave. NW

» **Info:** 202-639-9830

» **Hours:** Monday to Wednesday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Thursday and Friday, 11 a.m. to midnight; Saturday, 5:30 p.m. to midnight; Sunday brunch, 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

When he moved back to the U.S., he spent a year in Syracuse before moving to San Francisco, volunteering at various restaurants to do prep work until someone hired him on staff. "I worked at a small seafood restaurant, a tiny place, owned by Aqua," he said. "And then I moved on to work at the Navio at Northern California's

only AAA Five-Diamond resort, the Ritz-Carlton, Half Moon Bay.

When he finally returned to the East Coast, Sindoni worked as the chef de cuisine with the opening of AGAINN. Now that he has taken over the restaurant's kitchen, part of his early work involved some hefty training: "I went to London to do some research [about the cuisine] and just to eat," he said. "I gained 11 pounds in six days. I ate all day long."

Apparently the research has paid off, for Sindoni returned to D.C. with a cache of classic British recipes. "I was hugely inspired by that trip," he said, and has turned this British-style restaurant into what he terms a "gastropub." "The concept is necessarily British," he said, "but it is just really good food."

But not just the food. "We have 65 to 70 very rare Scotches," Sindoni added. Very British, indeed.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

What's behind organic and biodynamic wines

If you really want to know what's in your wine, take a moment to consider a study done last year by the Environmental Working Group, a nonprofit organization focused on public health. The report shows that certain fruits and vegetables — dubbed the "Dirty Dozen" — contain higher levels of pesticides, even after washing, than others because of absorption through soft skins. One of the members of the Dirty Dozen? You guessed it: grapes.

Does this mean that pesticides can find their way into wine? Maybe. Several studies have shown that trace amounts of pesticides have been detected in some wines from Europe and South America. But before you give up drinking your favorite bordeaux or malbec, it is important to note that the levels found in all of the wines tested were miniscule and not deemed harmful.

However, there is an effort afoot to reduce, if not eliminate entirely, the use of pesticides in farming in general and wine making in particular. This was recently highlighted at a gathering of vineyard owners and winemakers who participated in a panel discussion sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution's Resident Associates program.

With just a few differences, organic and biodynamic farming practices are both rooted in a philosophy that involves promoting the use of natural techniques to keep the soil and crops healthy without the use of pesticides or fertilizers. In vineyard management, some examples include using chickens to roam among the vines where they eat harmful pests. Wild flowers and other native plants are used to provide nutrients for the soil. Olive trees, apple trees and rose bushes are also planted throughout vineyards to encourage macrobiotic development. In the winery, only natural yeasts are used and no artificial chemicals are added.

Here are a few tasty examples of wines made from grapes grown naturally. Retail prices are approximate.

To get the organic party started, pop open a bottle of nonvintage **Pizzolato Fields Prosecco** from the Veneto region of Italy (\$12). This sparkling white wine is made from 100 percent certified organic Prosecco grapes, using the Italian Charmat method. Its nose displays a delicate, fruity, yeasty quality, with notes of green apple and nectarine that are repeated on the palate. Additional flavors of peach and citrus combine on the finish to provide a refreshing, crisp end.

The **2008 Heller Estate Chardonnay** from Carmel Valley, Calif. (\$19), is a rich and elegant example of an organic white wine. Bright scents of citrus and vanilla are prominent in the fragrant bouquet. Flavors of pear tart, baked apple and toasty brioche dominate on the front and middle palate while hints of vanilla and minerals slide in on the medium-bodied finish.

For a crisp, clean white wine experience, try the **2009 Benziger Signaterra Casey's Block Sauvignon Blanc** from Mendocino County, Calif. (\$24). Produced from certified organic grapes, the wine offers up captivating scents of lemon, lime and green grass. On the palate, flavors of peach and nectarine attack the front of the tongue while crisp acidity and stony minerality shine on the wonderfully balanced finish.

A great value in Spanish red wine is the **2005 Tarantas Classic Spanish Red** from the Utiel-Requena region of Spain (\$15). This blend of Tempranillo and cabernet sauvignon organic grapes produces a wine that is brimming with aromas of spices and earth on the nose and flavors of cherry, red berry and cedar lingering finish on the wood on the soft-styled body. Earthy tannins provide a pleasant, elegant finish.

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