



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

J&G Steakhouse's Chef Philippe Reininger got his start as part of a summer job in France.

J&G chefs' rendezvous with destiny

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

From Strasbourg, France, to the sidewalks of Washington may seem like a long trek. But for Philippe Reininger, executive chef at J&G Steakhouse, the city is simply another stop in a lifetime of cooking and travel.

Reininger and his boss, Jean-Georges Vongerichten (for whom the steakhouse is initialed, as in "J&G") grew up living about 5 miles apart in Strasbourg. Both chefs worked for Louis Outhier at L'Oasis, a 3-Michelin-star restaurant in La Napoule on the French Riviera, and to be in the same restaurant, that was a real coincidence, says Reininger. The friendship between Reininger and Vongerichten eventually charted the course of Reininger's culinary life, including his stints in New York and Boston.

As a teenager, Reininger started getting connected to the chemistry of food. To earn spending money, he took a summer job working in the front of the house at a Strasbourg restaurant. For several days, management assigned him to work in the kitchen. Taken by the joy of cooking, Reininger asked to return the following summer. And a career was started.

As Reininger tells it, he then took some cooking courses at school, with the ultimate goal of working in a Michelin-starred restaurant in France. "I worked many jobs around France at several Michelin-starred restaurants," he said, "and eventually ended up at L'Oasis with Louis Outhier at La Napoule, I then traveled around for three years, and even worked in Barcelona."

That city, he notes, is a primo

What is your comfort food?

An old traditional dish from my native Alsace: When farmers went to the fields they took a layered meal of potatoes and Alsatian Riesling-marinated meats in a clay pot. They left it at the baker's, who sealed the edges of the pot with dough and baked it during the day. It's called "baeckeoffe."

What is your signature dish?

Halibut with a scallion-chili sauce, with basil and celery. It has a whole lot of ginger, garlic, soy, chilies, Thai basil and scallions and these are cooked down.

What's your favorite ingredient?

Citrus and fresh ginger. I always can use them in a lot of dishes. A little bit of fresh lemon or lime juice! No heavy stocks anymore. Even in a risotto, it's an herbal infusion.

How have you changed your cooking style?

This has been a very easy transition to cook here.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

I have more restaurants to discover. I have had a great dinner at the Source and Citronelle. I want to try Komi.

IF YOU GO J&G Steakhouse

» **Where:** 515 15th St. NW
 » **Info:** 202-661-2440
 » **Hours:** 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday, 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday

destination for terrific food and an engaging lifestyle. "I was there at the beginning of a new wave of chefs, such as Ferran Adria," said Reininger, referring to the chef of the famous Bulli restaurant, noted for its approach to molecular gastronomy. "It was all very creative."

After kitchen jobs in France, Reininger spent much of his cooking career working for numerous Ritz-Carlton hotels, serving as executive chef in such locations as Boston, Barcelona, California and

Naples, Fla., and opening properties in Istanbul, New Orleans, Grand Cayman, Osaka, Japan, and, most recently, Philadelphia. Exposure to ethnic cuisines has inspired him to subtly incorporate exotic seasonings and cooking technique into his own style.

Now working with his colleague and lifelong friend Vongerichten, Reininger finds the transition to American steakhouse fare seamless. "I have spent time in all his restaurants," he said, "and I have spent time studying all his recipes. We always discuss what the local market requires [for tastes, presentations], and he is very involved in planning the menu. He collaborates, but I make lots of decisions."

As many of his local colleagues do, Reininger has developed ties with local producers for many of his ingredients. As he pointed out, "We have a clientele who enjoy prime cuts and prime seafood. J&G is not your daddy's steakhouse."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Napa Valley values

I have just returned from a tour out West where I spent three days as a judge in the San Francisco International Wine Competition. I tasted just more than 400 wines, and then rewarded myself with three glorious days kicking around the Napa Valley.

After tasting all of those wines at the competition (the winners will be announced at a future date), taking time to savor the samples of some of Napa Valley's best values was a nice change of pace and resulted in a few genuine gems.

The wines I tasted ranged in price from \$15 a bottle all the way up to \$500 a bottle. Needless to say, I enjoyed the latter as a result of someone else's charity. But for we mere mortals who still have car payments and day jobs, here are a few wines in the reasonable price range that are worth the hunt. Most of these wines are either available in our area or can be purchased directly from the winery (check with local jurisdiction regarding specific shipping laws). Retail prices are approximate.

The **2009 Neal Family Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc (\$18)** is made from 100 percent organically grown grapes. The first thing you notice is the floral bouquet of acacia flowers and ripe mango. The smooth, juicy mouthfeel exudes bright tropical fruits like guava, mango and papaya, and finishes crisp and fresh with a pop of grapefruit.

Owners Randy and Lisa Lynch call their **2006 Bennett Lane Winery, Maximus (\$35)** a "red feasting wine" and it's easy to see why. The blend of the cabernet sauvignon, merlot, syrah and malbec results in a wine that opens with aromas of blackberry, violets and chocolate-covered cherries. On the palate the wine displays flavors of dark berries, mocha and more ripe cherry fruit. The wine pairs well with burgers or steaks.

I am not a fan of overoaked, overextracted chardonnay wines, particularly ones made from fruit grown in the hot climate of the Napa Valley floor, but the beautifully balanced **2008 Signorello Chardonnay (\$42)** is stunning. The fruit is grown, managed and harvested from old-age vines. This kind of control helps produce a wine with a nose of creamy pears, orange blossoms and roasted nuts that leads to lovely flavors of green apples, tropical fruits and a hint of baked pear and butterscotch on the delightful finish.

If you're looking for an oxymoron in the wine world, try an elegant zinfandel. The **2008 Chateau Montelena Estate Zinfandel (\$25)** opens with pretty scents of strawberry and black raspberry on the nose and then melds into flavors of gentle black cherry and pomegranate in

the mouth. The medium-bodied zinfandel is nicely balanced and features sweet tannins on smooth, dry finish.

Kirk Venge has definitely stepped out of the shadow of his father, legendary winemaker Nils Venge, and into his own spotlight. Kirk's **2008 Venge Vineyards Silencieux (The Silent One) Cabernet Sauvignon, Napa Valley (\$28)** is proof. Much of the fruit for this labor of love comes from vineyards that Kirk's family has farmed for nearly a half-century and the name, Silencieux, is a tribute to these old vineyards that stand silent and bear consistent grapes year after year. The wine opens with scents of blackberries, cassis, licorice and coffee on the nose and then leads to flavors of black fruit, black currant and minerals on the concentrated, viscous palate.

While the name Silver Oak may not conjure up an image of delicately nuanced pinot noir, the famous producer of big California Cabernet's sibling, Twomey Cellars sure does. Their **2009 Twomey Bien Nacido Pinot Noir (\$50)** from the Santa Maria Valley is their first vineyard-designated pinot noir bottling. Made from organically farmed fruit, the wine is crafted in a forward style, featuring aromas of sweet strawberry and wild raspberries on the nose and repeated on the palate where they are joined by lush, ripe berries and undercurrents of red currants and violets, all built on a graceful framework with a fine balance between tannins and acidity.

