



Chef Richard Sandoval has opened Latino restaurants around the globe, from Denver and Las Vegas to Dubai and Qatar.

ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Richard Sandoval: Restaurant maestro

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Contrary to expectations, executive chef Richard Sandoval more closely resembles a tennis pro than an owner/co-owner of more than 25 restaurants, including four in the metro area. He is so lean and well toned that it's hard to grasp he spends almost his entire life eating and cooking. For many foodies, he is really one lucky guy.

That's been the case for Sandoval's entire life. A native of Mexico City, Sandoval reminisces about his childhood hours spent with his grandmother, sitting on the counter in her kitchen while she cooked and joining with the family at large get-togethers. "Our culture revolved around food," he said. "On weekends, the family gathered around platters of food."

His father owned several restaurants — Madeiras in Acapulco and Villa Fiore in Mexico City — and it bolstered the young Sandoval's interest in cooking. Between his grandmother's from-scratch cooking and his father's restaurant business, he says, by the age of 11 or 12 he had already begun to develop a palate and an understanding of fine cooking. "I had a head start," he said. "At a young age I was exposed to [good] chefs."

At the age of 14, Sandoval moved to Acapulco with his father to become more involved in and exposed to the restaurant business. "I thought I'd be a tennis player, playing in the United States and in Europe," he said. "But I realized that that was not a career, and I kept coming back to food."

What is your comfort food?

Queso fundido, next to carnitas. I always go back to it. At my grandmother's, we had homemade flour tortillas, melted cheese, and pico de gallo.

What are your must-have ingredients?

Chiles and cilantro

What's in your fridge?

You'll always find tortillas, avocados, chiles, cilantro and beans.

What has been your luckiest moment?

When Ruth Reichl gave me two stars. Everything went berserk, and we went from 40 to 250 patrons a night.

Which chef do you admire most in the world?

Chef Nobu Matsuhisa at Nobu (in New York and elsewhere) — I'm inspired with his style of cuisine. He has built a restaurant into an empire.

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Realizing that cooking was his real passion in life, he enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America.

After graduation, Sandoval began his cooking, returning to Acapulco to run his father's restaurant and later moving to New York City to open two restaurants there with a friend. Sandoval then returned to his passion, preparing and presenting traditional Mexican food and modernizing it for diners. The modernizing concept was unique in Manhattan at that time.

His first enterprise, Maya in New York, was soon followed by his sec-

ond, Tamayo in Denver, both of which began his modern Mexican cooking for which he is known. "I took my grandmother's old recipes and modernized them," he explained. "At that time the public didn't understand real Mexican food." Nevertheless, Sandoval's New York restaurants, Maya and Pampano are the only two Mexican restaurants to have earned two stars by the New York Times.

Shortly after that, Sandoval partnered with opera star Plácido Domingo to open the first of several joint enterprises. From there, Sandoval traveled the globe, opening Mexican and Latino restaurants from Denver and Las Vegas to Dubai and Qatar.

How does he keep track of it all? "I have a team of dedicated people," he said. "I still cook and oversee all the menu changes. Food is what made me well known. ... I'll show up at a restaurant and we taste 15 dishes. We may end up with four."

What do his parents think of his frenetic, food-focused pace? "My parents think I'm crazy," he said.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg White wines from the Loire Valley

Imposing ancient Chateaux perched atop mountainous pinnacles overlooking a river meandering through the vineyard dotted valley far below sounds almost like a picture on some travel poster. And it probably is. The Loire Valley is one of the most picturesque vineyard sites in France.

The region has traditionally been known mostly for its white wines. The cool climate found on the valley floor, hugging the banks along the Loire river, the longest river in France, is ideal for growing melon de bourgogne (muscadet), sauvignon blanc and chenin blanc.

The Valley has four distinctive viticultural appellations in three sections. The Muscadet region begins in the Lower Loire at the western-most edge of the valley, along the Atlantic coast, where the wines have a lovely yeasty-yet-fresh quality. Just inland from Muscadet, in the Middle Loire, is Anjou, where everything from rosé and dry red wines to crisp whites and stunning dessert wines can be found. East of Anjou is Vouvray, where wines are made predominately from chenin blanc and favor flavors of lemon, tropical fruits and wet stones.

The Upper Loire is home to Sancerre and Pouilly-Fume. Sauvignon blanc is the region's principal grape and produces white wines that are typically semi-dry, fresh and fruity.

The wines of the Loire Valley have long been a favorite of wine lovers throughout Europe and sought out by knowledgeable consumers here in the United States for decades. However, due to traditional labeling — a tad intimidating and confusing to most casual wine shoppers — and limited exposure on store shelves, most Loire Valley wines go unnoticed. Which is too bad, since so many of these wines are just what the wine doctor ordered for cooling down on hot days.

Here are a few choice Loire Valley wines to slip into your picnic basket or serve well-chilled at your next party. Retail prices are approximate.

Made exclusively from chenin blanc, the **2009 Champalou Vouvray**,



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Loire Valley, France (**\$17**) has a lovely nose of peaches and nectarines. The full mouthfeel offers up more peach fruit notes and hints of ripe apples and cloves. The wine offers an excellent value and a solid introduction to this splendid region.

Also made from chenin blanc is the **2010 Domaine des Aubuisieres Vouvray Cuvee de Silex**, Loire Valley, France (**\$18**). This wine has a delightful nose of apple blossom, lemon and minerals. Citrus flavors and light honey notes dominate the palate and add just a touch of sweetness at the end, but the wine maintains a very clean, crisp finish, thanks to substantial acidity.

A delicious introduction to the Sancerre appellation is the **2009 Thomas Crele Sancerre**, Loire Valley, France (**\$24**). Made from 100 percent Sauvignon Blanc, the nose of ripe pears and orange cloves is memorable. In the mouth, the wine feels lush and full with flavors of pears, apples and the ever-present mineral notes. The medium-bodied finish is smooth and well balanced, with hints of lemon peel popping in at the end.

Another sauvignon blanc from Sancerre is the **2010 Vacheron Sancerre**, Loire Valley, France (**\$27**). This wine has a nose of honey and minerals that is rich and powerful. On the palate, it is intense, yet bright with predominate flavors of pear, white peach and nectarine. The finish is long and lush with hints of wet stone at the end.

For a special treat, try the **2007 Baumard Savennieres Trie Speciale** from the Anjou region of the Loire Valley (**\$28**). This Chenin Blanc features a nose of ripe apples, white flowers and wet stone. The palate has a polished texture that features a complex mixture of roasted almonds, white nectarines and honey. A delicious alternative to the everyday chardonnay.

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