

"Understanding pastry making gives skills for savory cooking," says Urbana executive chef John Critchley. "You learn to pay attention to the details and to be more exact in the methods of preparation in terms of steps and execution."

ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER



## Urbana's urbane chef

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Raised in a small fishing town outside Boston, Urbana's new executive chef, John Critchley, has developed a passion for the ocean and its wealth of food. Though he may excel in catching and cooking seafood, his real and enduring love extends to every facet of the culinary world.

"I started in the kitchen when I was 14," he said. "I worked as a dishwasher in a family friend's restaurant, and it was very appealing. There was a real sense of family." By the time he graduated from high school, he had advanced to the restaurant's line cook.

With such an early introduction to the field, it is no surprise that Critchley attended the Culinary Institute of America. Critchley concedes that, at first, his family was dubious about his career choice. "But once they saw the campuses of the Culinary Institute and the New England Culinary Institute, they had a better outlook on the career," he explained.

After graduation, Critchley headed to Williamsburg, where he worked as a line cook for Ford's Colony Dining Room. But his next move to the nearby Marcel Desaulniers' Trellis Restaurant helped him hone his skills. There he executed bread and pastry production: "My goal was to be well-rounded," he said.

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### What is your comfort food?

Pizzas, Japanese food such as sushi and sashimi, and grilled vegetables. And slow-cooked pork shank.

### What has been the greatest influence on your cooking?

Ken Oringer. I worked with him for five years opening restaurants and traveling around the world two times. I also read lots of book like Harold McGee's "On Food and Cooking," which I have read five times. I love reading the philosophy of how and why

food gets [cooked].

### What's in your fridge?

Baby food and milk. Lots of vegetables, but not many meats except for ground meat for chili. It's pretty basic.

### What is your favorite ingredient?

A lot of spices and varieties of dried seeds and fresh herbs.

### Which is your favorite cuisine?

Whatever is local, and that depends on where you are. I still am very fond of raw fish.

### IF YOU GO Urbana

- » **Where:** 2121 P St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-956-6650
- » **Hours:** Breakfast, 6:30 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. Monday to Friday; lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday to Friday; dinner, 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, 5:30 p.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday; brunch, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

ods of preparation in terms of steps and execution." He added that several of his chef friends who never worked in the pastry field now wish that they had done a little pastry work throughout their career; pastry training is generally not something savory chefs focus on.

When Critchley returned to the

Boston area to work with chef Ken Oringer, he once again found his niche with seafood preparation: he was sous chef at the Uni Sashimi Bar. "That was a lot of fun," he said. "It was something new and unique, to be able to showcase fish at its best. I think they are much more appealing than land animals and poultry."

As he explains it, preparing seafood requires using it at its freshest and paying close attention to cooking it. "Meats can develop flavors on their own," he said. "But cooking seafood showcases the flavor that's already there."

Does that mean that Critchley ignores the full range of ingredients at hand? By no means. Though he possesses a talent for seafood, his other signature dishes include such temptations as a saddle of lamb rubbed with dried herbs, lavender and cinnamon for a very floral Moroccan flavor.

## The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

# Clicks versus bricks

One of the most frequently asked questions I get is where can consumers purchase the wines they read about in this column or other wine reviews.

I make an effort to make sure that many of the wines that I write about are available in local wine shops. However, once in a while, area shops may not carry a particular wine or the wine may be available in limited quantities.

Until recently, consumers had little choice about how they purchased wines, limited only to wines that merchants carried. That all changed on May 16, 2005, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states that permitted wineries to ship wine out of their jurisdiction must also allow wineries outside of the state to ship wines in. The lawsuit pitted the states' rights groups, who argued for preservation of state alcohol regulation systems based on the 21st Amendment, and wholesalers, who control about 98 percent of the wine market, against the small winery owners who felt that the existing three-tier system of distribution failed to adequately represent their wines. This left wine lovers with relatively limited means to obtain small-volume-production wines.

The District has allowed residents to receive wine shipments for quite some time, and Virginia opened its borders shortly after the high court's ruling. Until recently, Maryland was the lone holdout in the area. Starting July 1, Maryland joined its neighbors, allowing win-

eries located outside the state to ship up to 18 cases of wine per year to Maryland residents who are of legal drinking age. The Maryland bill excludes shipments from out-of-state retailers.

But just because consumers can get wines shipped to their doorstep doesn't necessarily mean they should. Most states still require the winery to collect sales taxes on the transaction, often adding \$3 to \$5 per bottle to the price tag.

Developing a relationship with a local wine shop can have many ancillary benefits. First, in my opinion, is the exposure to a variety of varietals. As your merchant gets to know you and your palate, he or she can offer suggestions that can broaden both your knowledge and your appreciation of different styles of wines. Next, many wine shops will actually let you try a wine before you buy it. Or, at the very least, will include you on an email list that will alert you to in-store wine tastings, many featuring winemakers or producers.

I also like the fact that I can buy a couple of bottles to take home and enjoy them in a more neutral environment. That way, if I like the wine, I can always call the wine shop and ask them to put a few more bottles aside for me. A few too many times I have had my "wine goggles" on while visiting a winery or wine shop and end up ordering a case (or two) of a particular wine only to discover that once I get it home, I am not as in love with it as I thought I was.

Several wine shops in the area offer presale notices for highly allocated wines, as well as invitations to wine dinners or upscale tasting opportunities to clients. Lastly, many wine shops offer discounts to regular customers, especially if they are recommending a particular wine. It is always prudent to ask for a "case discount" (usually 10 percent or more) when you are buying 12 or more bottles of wine from any merchant.

The bottom line is that shipping laws now provide more options to consumers to purchase hard-to-find or "cult" status wines that local wine shops may not have access to, and that's a good thing.

But I would recommend that consumers first ask their local wine merchants to find and acquire a particular wine on their behalf. If you do order wine online, make sure that the juice is worth the proverbial squeeze. Shipping charges and exposure to extreme temperatures in transit can turn your prized wine into sour grapes.



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