

Jonathan Seningen: Seeing food as art

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

A native of Maryland's Eastern Shore and a nature lover by heart, Jonathan Seningen, executive chef of SAX restaurant, knows a thing or two about fishing. He grew up catching and grilling perch, he says. But more importantly, he knows volumes about tackling seasonal cooking and extracting the finest flavors from the freshest produce.

For much of his culinary career, Seningen, a graduate of the French Culinary Institute in New York, mainly has been identified with preparing seafood at its best. But don't let that image fool you into thinking that this young chef can't compete in classic cuisine.

After gaining his degree, Seningen worked at Atlas for Paul Liebrandt. He then moved on to Terrance Brennan's Artisanal restaurant, also in New York. "I was [in New York] for four years," he said, "and New York was my playground. I could do what I wanted and got to see what was going on in the cooking world there."

After a brief stint as a private chef, Seningen spent time in Spain and France to hone his skills; he then returned to the U.S. and to D.C. to work for chef Yannick Cam at his now-closed Le Paradou in Penn Quarter. That job, says Seningen, was a turning point in his career, for he credits Cam with helping to shape his own inner chef. "I stopped trying to re-create from memory," he said. "I really started to develop the cuisine in me. ... That was the best training experience I could have had."

Explaining what his cuisine is, Seningen says, "That is what I've started to find, what is unique to me from what I've learned. For example, it's beautiful, the sungold tomatoes that I picked this morning. Simple, beautiful." Perhaps, then, his source of inspiration comes not only from seasonal goods, but also from what he sees as beautiful, both visually and gastronomically.

For example, he tells about a scallop dish, for which he paired seafood and fruit in what he describes as a



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EXAMINER FILE

What is your comfort food?

Jack Daniels, Jack Daniels and bacon.

What has been the greatest influence on your cooking?

The greatest influence on my cooking in general is just that when I first started cooking, it was very different than now. Now, I am finding a balance in life in general instead of trying to create the new next thing, I am balancing dishes, food, life and philosophy. I am trying to find happiness in that balance.

Which is your favorite ingredient?

What I have to have ... all that changes. There are so many beautiful things — vanilla, vanilla beans, beautiful olive oils, green almonds in season, black cardamom, foie gras, razor clams, live scallops, king crab in season.

Really anything as fresh as it can possibly be. I could go to California and try a tomato in season, but that would never be as good as a tomato [just picked] from my garden, or from my grandfather's garden.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

There are so many in D.C. that I haven't had a chance to try ... [but now] Bibiana and Palena.

Which chef do you admire most in the world?

Yannick Cam. There are a lot of other chefs out there, but his background and training were with some of the best chefs that ever lived. He had so much food/wine knowledge that I could work all my life but I'd never get there. And Michel Richard, I admire him as a person. He extended me time and courtesy.

IF YOU GO SAX Restaurant and Lounge

- » Where: 734 11th St. NW
- » Info: 202-737-0101
- » Hours: Dinner: 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. Monday to Thursday, 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. Friday, 7 p.m. to 2 a.m. Saturday

singular but delicious flavor combination. Or the tuna dish consisting of grilled tuna, fava beans, oranges,

radishes, and peaches topped with a cilantro-saffron sauce. "The color and flavor were there," he explained. "I started with fresh peaches, and the beautiful red of the tuna, then the greens and radishes."

In the end, it seems that Seningen sees his particular culinary presentations akin to artwork, creating a food melange that appeals to the senses. "When I see a dish," he said, "it's what is in season, but also it would work on canvas with colors, flavors. I am painting a beautiful dish ... what are the most beautiful things you have seen recently and put them on a dish."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Champagne — the method

Part two of a four-part series

Have you ever wondered how all of those bubbles actually get into a glass of champagne? I can assure you it is by very precise design. Champagne is one of the most highly controlled wine-growing regions in the world. Every step from grape to glass is regulated in order to ensure that consumers are getting the best product the region has to offer.

There are only three grape varieties that are allowed in Champagne; chardonnay, pinot noir and pinot meunier. They must be grown in one of the official 319 Crus. Even the winemaking process, using the Methode Champenoise, and the labeling are tightly controlled.

An excellent illustration of this control is how much juice a winemaker can use from a particular amount of grapes. Every crate of fruit that is brought to the presses is first meticulously weighed. For every 8,800 pounds of grapes that are pressed, only the first 541 gallons of juice is allowed to be collected as "cuvée." The next 132 gallons of juice is designated as *taille* (pronounced "tie") and must be either discarded or sold to a distillery — it may never be used in the vinification of champagne.

Once the *cuvée* has been collected, the juice is allowed to settle before being transferred to either large stainless steel or oak barrel fermenters where sugar is added and then yeast is introduced to initiate fermentation. The additional sugar ensures that the fermentation process will result in the desired alcohol level. Eventually, the still wine is sampled and decisions are made by the winemaker as to which vats will be used for blends as well as specific vineyard and vintage bottlings. This is referred to as "assemblage." Some still wine is held in reserve and may be added to a *solera* (a collection of wines from previous vintages) for use at a later date.

The final blends are then bottled with a small dose of *liqueur de tirage*, a mixture of still wine and sugar, and special yeasts, and then capped with a metal crown closure. A secondary

fermentation occurs in the bottle, and since the byproduct of carbon dioxide gas has nowhere to go, it is absorbed into the wine and voila! Bubbles. Regular *cuvée* wines must age in the bottle for at least 15 months on the lees (sediments) and vintage-declared wines for at least three years. When the wines have met the minimum aging requirement, they may be slowly turned from their horizontal sides and placed in a vertical position, cap-side down. Once the "riddling" process has collected all of the sediments in the neck of the bottle, the neck is plunged into a super-cooled bath that freezes the liquid in the neck and creates an ice plug that traps the sediment inside. The cap is removed and the pressure in the bottle expels the ice cap out of the neck. During this process, called *disgorgement*, some wine is lost, so the winemaker then "doses" the wine with either reserve wine or wine with some sugar in it. The amount of sugar added during the dosage procedure is what gives the Champagne its *brut* (driest), *extra-brut*, *dry*, *extra-dry*, *demi-sec* or *doux* (sweetest) characteristic. The bottle is sealed with a cork stopper and labeled. Most producers will allow the wine to rest a few more months before releasing it for sale.

Some winemakers will age their wines for a much longer time than required and riddle, *disgorge* and dosage their wines in tranches as market demand requires. As a general rule of thumb, the closer a wine is consumed to the *disgorgement* date, the fresher and bubblier it will be. Wines that have been aged following *disgorgement* will develop complex flavors and lose a little sparkle. The later is not necessarily a bad thing, it's simply a matter of taste.

Knowing a Champagne's *disgorgement* date, varietal composition and dosage allows the consumer to figure out what age and style of wine they enjoy. In order to fully appreciate Champagne, it should be served well-chilled in a tall slim glass with a wide flare at the top. The shape of the glass and the cold temperature preserves the bubbles and enhances the experience.

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