

Chef Peter Smith prepares a dish at PS 7's Restaurant.
EXAMINER FILE



Peter Smith has the cure

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

With the delight of a kid with a new toy, executive chef Peter Smith, owner of Penn Quarter's PS 7's, talks with great cheer about how he uses gin mash (the used botanicals from distilling gin) to cure meats. Dried beef as "ginola?" Pancetta as "gin belly?" "[The cured meat] tastes like gin," said Smith, with a chuckle. "I also use gin oil for poaching fish, say for a 'gin and tonic halibut.' It has a nice mellow flavor with a tonic foam."

But don't assume that Smith is all about culinary frivolity. He is a very serious chef with a penchant for twisting the rules to achieve unparalleled gastronomic results. Playful may be the key word to understanding Smith's cooking strategies, but simplicity and seasonal ingredients also guide his cooking decisions. As he explains, patrons must understand what he serves them, but each dish must have a "wow" element. Poaching halibut in gin oil certainly fits, as do his house-made hot dogs.

Smith's love for cooking got ignited when he was only 10 years old he says. The key? Trying to make a chocolate cake pictured on

IF YOU GO PS 7's Restaurant

- » **Where:** 777 I St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-742-8550
- » **Hours:** Lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; dinner, 5:30 p.m. to last seating at 9:45 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 5:30 p.m. to last seating at 10:30 p.m. Friday to Saturday

the cover of *Gourmet* magazine. Though his efforts failed, he loved the whole creative venture. And his grandfather acted as prime motivator in the young boy's life. An inveterate cook, and an Italian with a passion for presenting elaborate Sunday dinner, Smith's grandfather recruited the boy to prepare these family meals. Often, recalls Smith, he had to stand on a kitchen stool to reach the stovetop.

Although his military family lived in various countries, they settled in Northern Virginia just in time for Smith to start cooking in a local country club. Thereafter, the majority of his training took place in local

restaurants and at Gaithersburg's L'Academie de Cuisine. As he honed his other skills, even from the beginning he taught himself the basics of charcuterie. So much so that Smith has built something of a local reputation on the house-cured meats: Don't be surprised to see an entire glassed-in room at his restaurant devoted to hanging sausages and other meaty enterprises.

And all of that has led up to his current enthusiasm pairing his cured meats with cocktails. "That's the biggest change in the past few years," he said. "It started with Gina's cocktail one day. I went into the kitchen and made a dish to taste with it. It was something with pineapple or watermelon. So I made pork and pickled watermelon." Now, the mixologist helps him create cocktail to go with his "7 cocktails-7 courses" menu.

Curing meats may be one passion, but preserving seasonal vegetables is another. "I am trying to preserve the harvest," said Smith "That's the best part about canning. You can open up [spring] flavors in the winter with snow on the ground. ... If you open asparagus in December; it better be asparagus from the spring, even though it is preserved."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Champagne: The houses

Part four of a four-part series.

The Champagne region of France, located about 90 miles due east of Paris. "Growers" own more than 90 percent of the 84,000 acres of vineyards in the appellation but it is the Champagne "houses" that produce the majority of the wine.

The houses need to buy grapes from the growers, and the growers need to sell their grapes to the houses. This has led to a sort of *pas de deux* between the two parties where each relies on the other.

But of course, it's not as simple as that. It turns out that some houses have their own vineyards and buy additional grapes from the growers. And while most growers sell the majority of their grapes to houses, many keep the fruit and produce their own wines under their own label. Then there are growers who have banded together and formed cooperatives where they contribute their grapes to a common winery that produces Champagne for a specific label. Whew.

In the last installment of the four-part series, I will cover wines from a few unique houses. Retail prices are approximate.

It's tough to break into the wine-making business in Champagne, but somehow, that is exactly what Bruno Paillard did. Back in 1981, Bruno founded his eponymous winery with a passion for Champagne and a specific vision based on blending the best wines. "We have a priority of assemblage," says Paillard. "It is a process of composition which allows a house to blend from vintage to vintage and from vineyard to vineyard in order to achieve consistency of a style. That is why a house bears the name of a person instead of a place. Something to consider."

I enjoy considering the consistently delicious **Non-vintage Bruno Paillard Brut Premier Cuvee (\$40)**, a tribute to Bruno's vision. Tiny, elegant bubbles carry flavors of roasted nuts, green apple and bright citrus. Just a hint of orange clove and biscuit on the crisp, refreshing finish lends a note of refinement.

In stark contrast to the traditional

house "style" is Champagne Jacquesson. Founded in 1798 by Mémme Jacquesson, it remained true to its heritage of style and consistency, vintage after vintage. Through the centuries, the winery has changed hands only three times, the last in 1974 when it was sold to the current owners, the Chiquet family. When brothers, Jean-Herve and Laurent Chiquet took over the operation in 1988, they made a radical decision to redirect the winery from a "house" philosophy to a "grower" philosophy, emphasizing a sense of place versus a sense of style.

The wonderfully dry **Non-vintage Champagne Jacquesson 735 Cuvee Brut (\$60)** is a testament to the new style of winemaking embraced by the brothers Chiquet. The "700 Series" of wines is produced from the same Grand Cru and Premier Cru vineyards from the same vintage, with small additions of reserve wine from previous vintages as needed. The intention, according to Jean-Herve is to, "retain the best characteristics of each harvest and not to disguise the variations that each year brings." It features flavors of honey, apple and nectarine on a weighty palate with exceptional balance and finesse. The slightly creamy mouthfeel provides a silky-yet-firm finish.

Champagne Philipponnat is another winery that advocates terroir over technique, using pinot noir grapes from their coveted hillside vineyard, Clos des Goisses, a five and a half hectare site overlooking the Marne River. In addition, the house buys chardonnay and pinot muenier grapes from exceptional growers. Charles Philipponnat describes the house style as a balance between freshness and intensity. "We want to produce a wine with complexity without weight," he is fond of saying.

The **Non-vintage Philipponnat Brut Royal Reserve (\$40)** is a blend of mostly pinot noir with 30 percent chardonnay and a small amount of pinot muenier. Aromas of ginger and brioche dominate the nose while flavors of nectarine, lime and roasted nuts sit lightly on a frame of chalky minerality. The finish is delicate and charming, leaving a graceful impression on the tongue.

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