



Chris Nye, chef at Pizzeria Orso in Falls Church, got his start cooking elaborate meals at home.

GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

Chris Nye: Pizza perfection

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

A native of Minneapolis, executive chef Chris Nye at Falls Church's Pizzeria Orso is not the least bit Italian. So how can he produce such dream-about pizzas and luscious Italian meals? For starters, he grew up in a family in which good eating and home-cooked meals were standard.

Nye, along with his brother and mother, was responsible for the elaborate meals the family would enjoy together, thus giving him his first experiences in a kitchen. "My mom always insisted we would be at home for dinner," he said. "This was to be with the family because food was the centerpiece for the family." In addition, Nye's mom, prepared good, healthful, traditional Jewish food, he says, and she always insisted that her family clean their plates.

During his teens, Nye would take any food-related job he could find, beginning restaurant work at the age of 16. He's apparently done it all, from scooping ice cream to managing a small restaurant. Deciding to attend the Culinary Arts program at Minneapolis Community College, Nye took part-time work with friend and mentor, Jonathan Hunt, to open the restaurant Al Vento. It would seem that that work formed the basis for his now all-Italian passion: "It offered pizza [on the menu], and I am passionate about pizza and Italian food," he said. "I really love pizza and it was a great platform to learn the ingredients for Neapolitan pizza."

Nye talks about the joys of Neapolitan pizza, a cook-fast pie that finishes its oven work in about 90 seconds. "This way the cheeses don't get rubbery," he explained. It helps, he adds, that Pizzeria Orso

What is your comfort food?

Pasta, generally with tomato sauce. When I go home, and I want quick food, that's it. Pizza would also be a comfort food, but I can't make it everywhere. I don't do delivery pizza.

What has been the greatest influence on your cooking?

My wife, for not letting me get down on myself. And Bertrand Chemel [chef at 2941 restaurant], his drive and energy level.

Where is your favorite place in the world?

I hope to find it someplace,

but right now, it's Target Field [Minnesota] with my wife and some hot dogs. Or the Boundary Waters between the U.S. and Canada for fishing.

What's in your fridge?

Beer, mustard, bread, hummus, and very little else. I don't eat at home much.

What is your must-have ingredient?

Salt. Good sea salt. That is a must. Most people don't understand how to season so using it properly can make a difference. Canola oil for searing and roasting and a good olive oil for dressings.

IF YOU GO Pizzeria Orso

- » **Where:** 400 S. Maple Ave., Falls Church
- » **Info:** 703-226-3460
- » **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Friday to Saturday, 11:30 to 9:30 p.m. Sunday

uses an oven crafted out of volcanic ash, only one of three such ovens in the United States. "These have been produced by the same family for four or five generations from the ash of Mount Vesuvius," he said. And of course, it's imported from Naples.

Thus it seems the trick of divine pizza comes at least partially from the oven, and Nye further explains the benefit of lava for pizza cooking. For one, the oven has no fan, so its temperature reaches and maintains its 900 to 1,000 degrees, leaving little room for error. As

an added benefit, the lava oven imparts a smoky taste and a slight char to the pizzas, enhancing their overall flavor.

That's critical, of course, but the chef's skill seals the deal. "I ate at every pizzeria in the area," he said. "And ou [yeast] dough is unlike any other elsewhere. It's above the others in its fermenting time."

Plus Nye has worked in some very upscale restaurants, honing his culinary skills in such places as Cafe Bould in New York, where he met executive Chef Bertrand Chemel of Falls Church's elegant French-American dining destination, 2941; Chemel invited Nye to work for him at the restaurant in 2009. So Nye can draw upon his classic training to produce exceptional pizzas and Italian dishes. But these may well veer far from their Italian roots. "I put an American spin on things," he said. "For the Creole pizza, I make it with andouille sausage and corn," adding that all the charcuterie and breads in the restaurant are made in house.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Wine Primer 101: An education

Editor's note: This is the first in a two-part series.

Do you want to learn more about wine but don't know where to start? Or are you just looking for a reasonably priced wine that will expand your palate's horizon? You are not alone.

I recently spent the morning with a friend's daughter, Samantha, a law school student who was looking for some guidance about the current job market. After a while, our conversation turned to wine. Sam explained that while she liked wine, she really did not know much about it. And while she wanted to learn more about wine, her graduate school-budget did not give her a lot of disposable income to play with. In addition, she confessed she just did not know how to go about learning more about wine. In her words, "It just seems like there is a lot to know."

After speaking with Samantha, it struck me that while the next generation of wine drinkers may want to drink wine, they don't necessarily know how to go about understanding what wine they are drinking. With an estimated 40,000 different labels of wine crowding various wine shop shelves, picking the right wine can be downright confusing, with decisions often dictated by price or, worse, an eye-catching label.

According to a report published last year by the Wine Industry Council, not only is wine consumption among Americans up for the 16th consecutive year, but the greatest growth is being fueled by consumers who range in age from 25 to 32. In 2008 alone, nearly half of that segment reported an increase in wine consumption. So what's a budding wine enthusiast to do if they really want to jump into the proverbial wine barrel?

The first thing I recommend is to read about wine from as many different sources as you can. Of course, I am partial to the advice given in this column, but I also advocate reading books and magazines from a variety of authors. Natalie McLean, a veteran wine author and self-proclaimed wine cheapskate, has a new book out, "Unquenchable: A Topsy Turvy Quest for the World's Best Bargain Wines" (\$16), where she travels the world in search of the best wine values. One of her more whimsical tips in the book is to buy wine with impossibly long names, written in gothic script. This usually applies to German Rieslings, whose bottles may sit on retailer's shelves as a result of misunderstood labeling—driving the price down for a very good wine.

One of my favorite recommenda-



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tions for neophyte oenophiles is Oz Clarke's "Let Me Tell You About Wine — A Beginner's Guide to Understanding and Enjoying Wine" (\$20). While it is simplistic in format, it is also very comprehensive in content. About half of this book is devoted to wine basics such as what types of grapes wines are made from, how to buy and store wines, and, of course, how to taste wine. A section on food pairing is invaluable for dinner parties and holiday entertaining.

Wine retailers love developing loyal customers, so many wine shops will periodically offer tastings to introduce new wines to consumers. Check out a couple of wine shops and tell them what you want to learn about and be very specific about your price range. Some retailers will even open a bottle or two for you in the shop so you can try-before-you-buy.

Of course, actually tasting wine is the best way to really learn. I think one of the best white wines to cut your teeth on is sauvignon blanc since it's easy to identify specific characteristics. The **2010 Casa Lapostolle Sauvignon Blanc (\$9)** from Chile offers plenty of classic grapefruit and nectarine flavors on the palate while delivering a clean, crisp finish filled with citrusy notes.

The **2010 Norton Malbec (\$10)** from Argentina is an easy-drinking red wine that offers loads of juicy red and black fruit on a soft frame. A nice touch of spice on the finish provides a bit of depth and complexity.

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