



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

Chef Annie Leconte, of Litestars Restaurant, opened the eatery after learning to cut fat and calories from meals while cooking at home.

Annie Leconte: The French connection

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

If you have seen the movie “Julie & Julia,” you may remember its truly defining scene: when Julia Child (Meryl Streep) whisks together her white sauce with one pound of butter. For many foodies, that speaks volumes about the underlying opulence and glory of French cuisine.

As it turns out, however, not every French woman creating meals turns to butter, heavy cream and duck fat. Consider the case of Annie Leconte, the brains and energy behind L Street’s French-food-as-health-food restaurant, Litestars.

In her French-accented English, this native of Normandy explains that after moving to the Washington area some 20 years ago, she and her family gained weight on the typical American diet. “When I came,” she said, “I tasted it all, hot dogs, pizzas, burgers. After a while, I felt it on my body and my hips.”

As an antidote to her and her family’s weight gain, Leconte turned back to her cookbooks, and to the culinary lessons learned from her mother’s kitchen. “My mother was adventurous, a good cook,” she said. “She taught me to use always-fresh ingredients. ... She went to market to buy fresh ingredients. In a supermarket, you don’t feel anything ... all is in clear plastic.”

With her kitchen skills and passion for cooking, Leconte set about

What is your comfort food?

Chocolate, an 80 percent cocoa bar.

What’s in your fridge?

Soy milk, lots of soy yogurt, also whole-milk yogurt, wheat germ, flax seed and produce.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

Westend by Eric Ripert and Gilbert’s Steakhouse in McLean. It’s

simple but good.

What is your must-have ingredient?

Flour. Here we use white whole-wheat flour. Before, I used only white flour.

Where are your favorite places?

Paris and Annapolis, because we love sailing on the Chesapeake. It is so peaceful.

IF YOU GO Litestars

- » **Where:** 2101 L St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-293-0281
- » **Hours:** 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

creating recipes stripped of excess fat and calories. “I learned myself,” she said. “I followed the U.S. Food and Drug Administration code and labeling and used nutrition software.” As she cooked, Leconte weighed all the ingredients and took extensive notes. This way, she says, all the dishes turn out the same.

After several years of trial and error, she developed numerous healthful recipes, and as a result, both she and her family lost the weight they had gained. “For my boys,” she said, “they loved the pizzas and burgers. They complained

to the doctor, ‘My mom doesn’t give us pizzas and burgers except once a week.’”

Not only has her family benefited, but their increased health inspired her to open Litestars, a restaurant dedicated to fine dining but minus the fat and calories lurking in similar dishes at standard restaurants. Take the bison tartlet, for example. Geared to serve as a light lunch or dinner, the tartlet consists of cooked ground bison from Gunpowder, Md., on a crust made by mixing white whole-wheat flour, high in fiber, with shortening made of palm oil — lactose-free, with no cholesterol, sodium and trans-fatty acids — and complementary seasonings. All this, for a mere 200 calories.

What pleases Leconte the most, probably, is that her family enjoys eating at Litestars. “They say it is like eating at home,” she said. “They are all now in good shape.” No wonder the restaurant motto is “Healthier, Fresher, Tastier.”

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Oregon pinot noir — a fall classic

There is a discernible dip in temperature, leaves are falling from the trees and pumpkins are popping up on porches throughout the neighborhood. Fall is finally here.

There is just something about the onset of autumn that resets my palate, sliding the meter on my taste buds from white wines to reds. The varietal transformation is complete the moment my wife changes the sheets on the bed to flannel. It’s as if I have some sort of oenophilic Pavlovian response to our down comforter that makes me crave red wine.

But not just any red wine. I want to acclimate my tongue and ease into my red wine season with something that is charming yet sturdy, commanding yet elegant. I want pinot noir. Not just any pinot noir. I want Oregon pinot noir.

Oregon has long been known for its spectacular scenery and fertile soils, but it hasn’t been until the last 20 years or so that the state has achieved international recognition as a major wine-producing region. Willamette Valley, roughly an hour’s drive south of Portland, is now known for producing world-class pinot noir wines that have a style all their own, while farther south the Umpqua and Rogue valleys have developed a reputation for Bordeaux- and Rhone-style wines.

Blessed with a diversity of soil composition, and a temperate climate with maritime influences, the Willamette Valley is about as ideal a place to grow the finicky pinot noir grape as anywhere. The warm days and cool nights contribute to even ripening, intense fruit characteristics and bright acidity. In general, the grapes are a touch bolder than their French cousins and a bit rounder than the pinot noir revolution going on Down Under.

They display flavors of wild strawberry, dark cherry, graphite, tea and bramble. Stony minerality is another hallmark feature of these wines.

Best of all, they’re just right for fall. Retail prices are approximate.

Benton Lane is a family-owned winery located in the heart of the Willamette Valley. They have a unique approach to growing fruit and producing wine, taking the best practices of sustainable, organic and biodynamic farming techniques. Their **2008 Benton Lane Pinot Noir (\$21)** displays red fruit and dark cherry characters, both in the nose and on the palate. Wild cherry and juicy raspberry flavors mingle with hints of spice and minerals.

Elk Cove Vineyards is one of Oregon’s oldest wine producers. The **2008 Elk Cove Willamette Valley Pinot Noir (\$22)** displays vibrant aromas of black cherries, spices



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and vanilla. Intriguing flavors of nutmeg combine with ripe flavors of strawberries and cherries and mineral overtones. The mouthfeel is soft, round and warm with a juicy impression of ripe fruit. The finish is long, with hints of baking spices, vanilla and sweet tannins, all balanced by abundant acidity.

A friend of mine recently told me about a winemaker, Patricia Green, who was producing seductive pinot noir, so I decided to track down a bottle. I am glad I did. The flavors and aromas in the **2009 Patricia Green Cellars Whistling Ridge Pinot Noir (\$36)** sweeten and deepen as the wine opens and finds its balance. A round entry gives way to a mouthful of juicy raspberry, black cherry and strawberry flavors balanced by fine-grain tannins that support a long, pretty finish.

Cristom Winery owners Paul and Eileen Gerrie moved to Oregon in 1992 with their two children, Christine and Tom (Cristom in a contraction of the children’s names), with the dream of starting a winery dedicated to making world-class pinot noir. With the help of long-time winemaker Steve Doerner, I would say “mission accomplished.” The **2007 Cristom Jessie Vineyard Pinot Noir, Willamette Valley (\$49)**, exhibits complex aromas of roses, cherries and strawberries. It has a softer feel in the mouth that allows the lighter fruit characteristics (red cherries, raspberries and strawberries) to linger on the palate and just enough sweet tannin to reward the palate with a spectacularly long, seductive finish.

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