



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

Assaggi Osteria's executive chef, Domenico Cornacchia, has successfully opened three local restaurants.

Assaggi Osteria: Upscale bistro

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

What does it take to run a high-end bistro in upscale McLean? A chef who can dominate the playing field with a serious menu that reflects his training, here and in Europe. That chef is Domenico Cornacchia, executive chef and co-owner of the swanky Assaggi Osteria.

Like many of his Italian brethren, Cornacchia grew up in a family where food held a prime place in everyday life. It also helped that his mother was a very good cook. In fact, most of his family members had good kitchen skills, but his mother was his prime inspiration. "She would start with simple ingredients," he said, "and she would create a great recipe. I used to cook with her and tried to duplicate some of her recipes. She treated ingredients with great respect."

About age 16, Cornacchia went to work in a friend's restaurant and became passionate about food. "I went to culinary school for a course at the age of 19," he said. "The school used to send us to do [internships] in many different countries. I loved to come up with flavors, and different styles of cuisines fascinated me."

Not surprisingly, his family helped him find good restaurant jobs, a great asset to the young man's career. "It is a field where if

What's your comfort food?

Vegetables, salads, fruits. They don't require too much thinking, and they are fresh from the market.

What is in your fridge?

I love mustards, especially fruit-based mustards. These work well in many dishes.

What is your signature dish?

What I love to work with includes anything that is fruit, vegetables, lettuce, leafy greens. These are so delicate,

but if you treat them properly, you get the best results.

What are your essential ingredients?

Extra-virgin olive oil. That has got to be there, and sea salt.

What has been the greatest influence on your life?

Traveling. I have been exposed to different cultures, and I am seeing many similarities in recipes. I have learned not to be afraid of trying out recipes that are different.

If you go Assaggi Osteria

» **Where:** 6641 Old Dominion Drive, McLean

» **Info:** 703-918-0080; assaggiosteria.com

» **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

you take the right angle," he says, "it is very satisfying, but very demanding."

With such intensive European training, Cornacchia became very involved with Northern European cooking styles and food, helping

him learn about blending flavors to produce better dishes. That, of course, has helped him with setting up and running his own restaurants.

So why did Cornacchia end up cooking in the United States? As he explains, his many training periods, or stages, brought him to the States for brief kitchen stints. And his experiences really impressed him. "What struck me," he said, "was the level of the restaurant industry. It is so much more detailed than in Europe. Here, it is taken to the next level."

Cornacchia has successfully opened three local restaurants, each with its own take on both Italian and French cuisine, and with the inspired input of a talented chef.

The Vine Guy & Gal » Scott & Cindy Greenberg She-said, he-said Labor Day wines

We are very lucky. After being married for so many years, we still seem to agree on most things. But when it comes to picking our favorite wines to wind down the summer with, well, that's where we agree to disagree. While we both believe that Labor Day is all about saying goodbye to summer, we have very different opinions about the wine we chose to do it with.

So, as we prepare for re-entry back to the hectic world of school car pools, sports schedules and life in general, we each offer our perspective on the wines we pick to celebrate with on Labor Day. Retail prices are approximate.

She said

I like wines that commemorate the final days of summertime. Since the temperature is still warm, I tend to opt for dry to off-dry white wines. These include sauvignon blancs, albarinos and rieslings. These wines are versatile, refreshing and seasonally appropriate.

I like sauvignon blanc, and I love sparkling wines. The nonvintage **Lake Chalice Cracklin' Savie Sauvignon Blanc (\$19)** from Marlborough, New Zealand, marries these two concepts with success. Classic sauvignon blanc flavors of tropical fruit, passion fruit and grapefruit are carried over the palate by just a slight spritz of carbonation. The notes of citrus on the finish are accentuated by the bright, refreshing acidity. **QPR 8**

Albarino wines are quickly catching on. These Spanish white wines are flavorful yet delicate and pair with a variety of seafood dishes. Take the **2011 Martin Codax Albarino (\$14)** from Rias Baixas, Spain, for instance. The stainless-steel fermentation lets the pure fruit flavors of apple, nectarine and citrus shine through on the front of the palate, while the sur lie aging adds notes of pear and apricot on the charming finish. **QPR 8.5**

Summertime is a perfect time to break out a well-chilled riesling. These white wines can vary from bone-dry to very sweet, but the **2011 Joh.**

Jos. Prum Riesling Kabinett (\$24) from Mosel, Germany, strikes a perfect balance. This refreshing white displays scents of citrus blossoms and petrol (a coveted characteristic) on the nose and flavors of white peach and fresh apricots in the mouth. Notes of jasmine and lychee nut add to the tangy finish. **QPR 9**

He said

Labor Day does not necessarily signal the end of summer as much as it means a great excuse to have a party featuring grilled meats and red wines to complement. I consider the holiday weekend a warm-up for the much-anticipated arrival of cabernet sauvignon, zinfandel and syrah season.

I am a fan of the **2009 Rodney Strong Cabernet Sauvignon Alexander Valley (\$20)**, from one of the oldest winery operations in Sonoma, Calif. This beautifully made cabernet has remarkable structure and elegance for the price and offers up loads of dark plum, black cherry and blackberry flavors across the palate. Notes of spice and cocoa blend in on the supple finish. **QPR 8.5**

Old vines can make interesting zinfandels, and zin pioneer Joel Peterson knows how to coax the most complexity out of mature vines. His **2009 Ravenswood Old Vine Zinfandel (\$15)** from Lodi, Calif., offers scents of blueberry liqueur and cherry on the nose and rich flavors of spicy cherry, raspberry and blueberry in the mouth. Notes of pepper on the finish make it a classic. **QPR 8.5**

Crozes-Hermitage is a wine appellation in the northern Rhone Valley region of France. It does not garner as much attention as its neighbors, Cote-Rotie or Hermitage, but syrah-based **2007 E. Guigal Crozes-Hermitage (\$23)** is worth noticing. The smoky, meaty nose leads to flavors of dark plum, black cherry and spice in the mouth. The well-balanced finish has just a hint of black licorice on the back end. **QPR 9**

Note: QPR is a rating system that compares the quality a wine delivers relative to the price. A QPR of 10 is considered an excellent value.



COURTESY PHOTO