

Lonnie Zoeller has zest

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

With the various meanings of the word “zest” — enthusiasm, appetite, flavor — Lonnie Zoeller, executive chef of U Street’s compact wine food destination Vinoteca, fits the bill. For him, working the kitchen has fulfilled his life’s dreams and ambitions. “I am really passionate about cooking,” he explained.

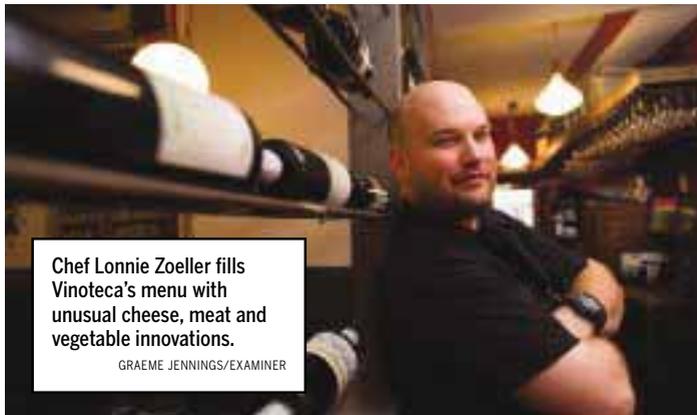
As with many of his contemporaries, Zoeller’s kitchen dreams were launched early on. A native of Cooperstown, N.Y., and a big baseball fan, he nonetheless decided as young as 12 that he preferred the kitchen to the baseball diamond. His next step: going to work in a local restaurant as a dishwasher and line cook.

After high school, he considered going to the local community college, but with the support of his stepdad, he attended the Culinary Institute of America instead. “I didn’t like college,” he said, “so why not cook if I am good at what I do?”

With his culinary degree in hand, Zoeller worked in various restaurants in the Northeast, including as a sous chef under the James Beard Award-winning Sam Reda at the Buffalo Chophouse in Buffalo, N.Y. He eventually ended up in D.C., working as a sous chef for local superstar chef José Andrés at his Mediterranean-focused restaurant, Zaytinya.

After several other cooking jobs in D.C., Zoeller spent six weeks working at Els Casals restaurant in Sagàs in northern Spain. There, he says, he ate local cheeses and charcuterie garnished with simple yet elegant toppings. “These don’t have to be complex so long as they are delicious,” he said.

And that is how he approaches his cooking at Vinoteca. Inspired by what he learned in Spain, and determined to focus on a menu with fewer



Chef Lonnie Zoeller fills Vinoteca’s menu with unusual cheese, meat and vegetable innovations.

GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

If you go Vinoteca

- » **Where:** 1940 11th St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-332-9463; vinotecadc.com
- » **Hours:** 5 p.m. to 2 a.m. Monday to Thursday, 5 p.m. to 3 a.m. Friday, 11 a.m. to 3 a.m. Saturday, 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Sunday

options but with more dazzling presentations, Zoeller has adopted techniques from the molecular gastronomy movement, in which chefs transform ingredients into different forms to capture a different presentation and heighten specific flavors. “I like to play around with the whole molecular thing,” he said, “but I don’t base my whole cuisine on this. I still work from scratch and don’t forget the basic skills of classic cooking.”

For example, he created a dish he nicknamed “bison in a berry patch,” an intriguing name for an entrée that starred a bison steak topped with a strawberry ancho-balsamic sauce. “I read about one chef who said, ‘When you have a protein on

What is your comfort food?

Any form of chicken, or chicken and rice. My wife is Colombian.

What is your most memorable dish?

The bison with the berries.

What is your favorite restaurant?

Bar Pilar and Café Saint-Ex.

Where do you go on vacations?

Bogotá, [Colombia]. My wife’s whole family is there.

What’s in your fridge?

Deli turkey, Romaine lettuce, cherry tomatoes, olives, chicken, mango juice.

a plate, how would you find that protein in nature?” Zoeller said. “So that’s what I am trying to do, taking that philosophy so what you create is internalizing what that animal does.”

When you scan his menu, filled with unusual cheese, meat and vegetable innovations, you get it: Zoeller is one happy guy, getting his kicks from kitchen creations.

The Vine Guy & Gal » Scott & Cindy Greenberg Wines for Thanksgiving

We both come from families where Thanksgiving is a big deal. Preparation begins almost a week ahead, and yet the rush to get everything on the table in time for dinner always reaches a chaotic crescendo just as everyone is sitting down. But we love it because it is an opportunity to gather with family and friends, and celebrate with fabulous food and an assortment of wonderful wines.

In order to help navigate the wine pairing challenge, we each offer our assortment of wines for this year’s Thanksgiving theme, all-American wines. Retail prices are approximate.

She said — white wines

I love to start with a sparkling wine. The nonvintage **Mumm Napa Cuvée M (\$23)** from Napa Valley, Calif., gently lifts aromas of ripe peaches, honeyed nectarines, pear fruit and hints of yeasty notes to the surface. The party continues on the palate, where flavors of baked apples mingle with hints of buttered toast. It’s all built on a creamy frame that emphasizes the long, clean finish. **QPR 8**

If you are looking for the perfect pairing for turkey, look no further than the **2011 Chateau Ste. Michelle-Dr. Loosen Eroica Riesling (\$20)** from the Columbia Valley in Washington state. This wine was originally a collaboration between the Mosel winemaker Ernst Loosen and Chateau Ste. Michelle. Today, it still delivers loads of apple, honeysuckle and pineapple aromas on the fragrant bouquet and beautifully seductive flavors of ripe apple, pears and white peaches. **QPR 9.5**

The **2009 Grgich Hills Estate Chardonnay (\$29)** from the Napa Valley is also good with turkey. This certified

biodynamic chardonnay offers generous aromas of pear cobbler with hints of orange blossom and toasty oak. The palate delivers flavors of wines twice the price with pretty notes of honeycrisp apple, lemon meringue and vanilla on the remarkably long and elegant finish. **QPR 9**

He said — red wines

I am sure that Francis Ford Coppola, the famous director-turned-wine producer, will have a bottle of the versatile **2010 Coppola Diamond Collection Scarlet Label Red Blend (\$18)** from Napa Valley on his Thanksgiving dinner table this year. This blend of zinfandel, syrah, petite sirah, cabernet sauvignon and merlot offers up aromas of dark cherries and red plums on the nose and flavors of blueberries, black currant, licorice and sweet oak on the medium-bodied frame. **QPR 8**

The **2009 Mondavi Napa Cabernet Sauvignon (\$25)** from California is wonderfully dense and extremely focused, with an aromatic nose of blueberry and saddle leather scents and flavors of blackberry, cassis and dark chocolate on the front of the palate that nicely integrate with notes of dried herbs and tobacco on the lengthy finish. **QPR 9**

I am a fan of pinot noir, which I think pairs nicely with both turkey and cranberries. So the **2010 Tyler Florence Gallery Vineyard Pinot Noir (\$40)** from Napa Valley will definitely be on our wine roster. The nose is bursting with aromas of baked raspberries and red berry fruit. A richly textured mouthfeel offers up plenty of gorgeous red strawberries, ripe cherry and a hint of cranberry on the finish. **QPR 8.5**

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.

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