



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

Chef Gregory Webb serves up a healthy dose of Mexican and Tex-Mex food at Tortilla Coast's Logan Circle restaurant.

Gregory Webb: A talent for Tex-Mex

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Bold flavors and brilliant though rustic platings are the hallmark of Gregory Webb's Mexican and Tex-Mex cooking. The new executive chef at Tortilla Coast, Webb is actually no stranger to this beloved culinary art form. A native of San Antonio, Webb grew up cooking with his mother, a keen and talented home chef. Indeed, by the time he was 6, Webb says, he was making enchiladas the right way. "What comes to mind," he says, "is that the first enchiladas she taught me were in the traditional style. She rooted her cooking in somewhat of an anthropological style. That was a passion for her."

It's rather unsurprising, then, that young Webb became an advocate of true Mexican and Tex-Mex flavors, and just as unsurprising that even as a youngster, all he wanted to do was cook. "I always wanted to be a chef," he says. "Julia Child and Graham Kerr, I watched them both on TV. That told me at the age of 5 I wanted to be a chef."

As well, young Webb helped his mom when she threw dinner parties, making everything from scratch. "I helped her with her big parties," he says. "We even made masa together. I was her prep cook." By the time he turned 14, Webb's family had moved to the East Coast, far from the Mexican culinary influences of his early childhood. But ironically, at the age of 15, he got a job at a Tex-Mex restaurant in Connecticut. "I remember it fondly, of course," he says. "I was, after all, a Texan, and I grew up eating Mexican and Tex-Mex, too, so I knew the food I was prepping," adding that perhaps his

If you go Tortilla Coast (Logan Circle)

- » **Where:** 1460 P St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-629-3280; tortillacoast.com
- » **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to midnight Friday, 11 a.m. to midnight Saturday, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday

mother might not have recognized the dishes the staff prepared, but that she was pleased her son had chosen cooking as a profession.

Deciding against attending culinary school, Webb chose to gain his culinary experiences by working for the most outstanding chef he could find. His first mentor turned out to be chef Robert Neroni, who graduated from the Culinary Institute of America and held several executive chef positions, including in Washington. "He really discovered me," says Webb. "He said I just needed some finesse and to travel. I did, with letter of entry to many great restaurants in New York City and New Orleans."

Finally, Webb returned to his native Texas, where he opened his namesake restaurant, Gregory's, in Houston. In 1998, he won the coveted Chef of the Year title from the Houston Chronicle. From there, Webb moved to New York City, where another mentor helped him sharpen his culinary skills. That led to the big turning point of his career: being tapped as the executive chef for the W Hotel Mexico City in Chapultepec, Polanco. "I learned the difference between Tex-

What is your comfort food?
Enchiladas.

What's in your fridge?
I have a heck of a pantry, with 14 vinegars, salts, an enviable spice rack, plus in the refrigerator a whole chicken, chuck roast, pieces of salmon, thick-sliced smoked bacon, grilled baby back ribs, vegetables, blueberries.

What is your signature dish?
Black opal ducking ... a half-cured duckling from which I removed the interior fat. It's a play on Peking duck in Mexican style.

What is your must-have ingredient?
Black pepper. I am enamored with tellicherry black pepper. Also curry and cumin.

What was the luckiest moment of your life?
When I met my wife-to-be.

Mex and regional Mexican cooking," he says, adding that his boss flew him all over the country to sample and understand regional flavors.

Returning to the United States for family reasons, Webb vowed to go back to his chef's post in Mexico, but as often happens, life and circumstances changed the course of his career: He married, and then the couple decided to move to Washington two and a half years ago. Now, he can say quite frankly, "I love the city. And I am cooking food I really love. ... It's the kind of food I found myself coming back to my whole career, and we're creating something that people can really sink their teeth into."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Value wines from Chile

For the second installment of my ongoing series featuring the best wine values of the world, I decided to tackle one of the most challenging wine-producing countries of all: Chile. What makes Chile such an interesting country to cover is its plethora of delicious wines at reasonable prices. Lately I have had the good fortune to sample some remarkable wines that offer a very high quality-to-price ratio and are readily available in the marketplace.

Bordered by more than 2,500 miles of Pacific coastline to the west and the Andes mountains — creating a natural border with Argentina — to the east, Chile is a very narrow country with a very rich history of winemaking.

Winemaking began in earnest there in the mid-16th century after European missionaries introduced grapevines to the region in order to supply wine for religious ceremonies. In the latter part of the 18th century, wine exports from Chile increased dramatically following the introduction of traditional European varietals, such as cabernet sauvignon, merlot, syrah and chardonnay. The foreign vines adapted quickly to the climate and soils of Chile, particularly in the Maipo and Casablanca valleys. Today, many of these vines are thought to be the only pre-phylloxera specimens that exist in the world today. (Phylloxera is a virulent agricultural pest that destroyed the vast majority of the vineyards in Europe in the late 19th century.)

Today, the focus of Chilean winemakers has shifted from making mass-produced wines for domestic consumption to crafting high-quality wines for export. Many of these artisan wines offer a substantially better value than some of their European counterparts. Here are a few of my favorites. Retail prices are approximate.

The **2011 Cousino-Macul Antiquo Reservas Chardonnay (\$12)** from the Maipo Valley offers a refreshing break from typical overly oaky-tasting chardonnays. This beautiful white wine features bright scents of apple, pear and banana that are repeated on the palate, where they are joined by flavors of green melon and tropical

fruit. The finish is fresh and crisp, with just a hint of toasted butter. **QPR 9.5**

Pinot noir is usually associated with growing regions such as Burgundy, France, and Willamette Valley, Ore., but the **2011 Ventisquero Pinot Noir (\$13)** from the Casablanca Valley is looking to change that. The fragrant bouquet offers up graceful scents of dark strawberry and cherry. Elegant flavors of black cherry, dark plum and baking spices are heightened by subtle notes of vanilla, thanks to the time the wine spends aging in barrels. The clean finish is enhanced by soft tannins and solid acidity. **QPR 9.5**

Cabernet sauvignon is beginning to find its voice in Chile, and the **2010 Los Vascos Cabernet Sauvignon Grande Reserve (\$14)** from the Colchagua Valley is hitting all the right notes. Remarkably smooth and elegant, it offers a mouthful of flavors toward the blackberry end of the spectrum, with notes of dark plum and cassis in supporting roles. Hints of cedar and tobacco blend in on the pleasant finish, providing depth associated with wines two or three times the price. **QPR 10**

I am a fan of red blends, and the **2010 Canto de Apalta (\$19)** from the prodigious Chilean producer Lapostolle is one of my favorites from South America. Made from carmenere, merlot, cabernet sauvignon and syrah, it sports a beautiful bouquet of spices and baked cherry complemented by hints of tobacco and cocoa. Fruit-driven flavors of red cherries and blackberries lead the charge upfront while subtle notes of tobacco, licorice and pepper round out the long finish. **QPR 9.5**

The **2008 Oveja Negra Lost Barrel (\$25)** from the Maule Valley is a syrah-based wine made from a collection of barrel selections from the best hand-harvested fruit from the estate. It is rich and powerful in the mouth with structure and depth of wines found at twice the price. Jammy black fruit and mint seduce the nose while lush flavors of ripe black cherries, black plums and creme de cassis coat the tongue upfront. Prominent notes of vanilla and mint complete the elegant finish. **QPR 10**

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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