

Barry Koslow - Chef of Mendocino Grille & Wine Bar

Rocker hits a chord in the kitchen

If Barry Koslow hadn't bumped into his old cooking instructor at an Elvis Costello concert at Wolf Trap in 2002, who knows what he would be doing now? Koslow, who looks a little like Elvis Costello himself (hip, with a sharp pair of glasses and dark, spiked hair), might still be playing music, rather than working as executive chef at Georgetown's Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar. For years he played guitar in a Chapel Hill-based rock band in North Carolina. He and his bandmates pretty much lived in a 15-passenger diesel van, driving it to death while playing college towns for beer money. "We'd sleep in the van, come back and drink the beer money. Then we'd get back on the road and do it all over again." In between he'd wait tables to make ends meet. But then he found himself living with a sous chef, and he spent his free time reading his roommate's cookbooks and magazines and trying out the recipes. Eventually, with the band not headed for the Billboard 100 anytime soon, he came back to his hometown, Washington, in 1997 and decided to fully commit to cooking. He found a job advertisement for a restaurant assistant in Alexandria, where he grew up. "I handled the day-in-day-out [work] of cooking. I did everything from the prep work, cooking in the morning, loading up the oven [to] mopping the dishes and the floor. Then the next day I'd do it all, all over again." Koslow enjoyed the challenge. But there was a drawback. "I thought, this is good, but no one respects me as a cook." He decided he needed to go to culinary school to learn the fundamentals, so he took himself off to L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg to do its professional course. He not only learned to cook, but he met his wife Andrea there, too. And he landed an externship at Todd Gray's Equinox. He stayed at Equinox three years, working all the stations from garde-manger to saucier and imbibing Gray's insistence on local and seasonal ingredients. Then came that Costello concert and a chance meeting with L'Academie's former head instructor, Pascal Dionot. Dionot had been enlisted by Jonathan Krinn to help open his contemporary French-American restaurant, 2941, in Falls Church. And Dionot in turn enlisted Koslow.

The place immediately attracted press and "exploded with people. I wound up working doubles every day plus brunch," said Koslow.

Eventually it was time for him to move on and practice the intensive techniques he had learned under Krinn. Todd Gray put him in touch with Michel Richard, who was looking to fill a slot at Citronelle. While there he worked almost all the stations, developing as poissonier a passion for working with fresh fish.

“It was like graduate school, very different from anything I’d ever done in the past,” Koslow said. “The kitchen had that purity, an aim for perfection and precision. The stakes seemed so high, everyone around was so good.”

Learning to get the details accurate was daunting for Koslow: “You put things on [the plate] at the speed of light with surgical tweezers! I had to get fast and more precise. It was such a fast-paced kitchen!” And what happened if you made a mistake? He chuckles. “You don’t want to know.”

Working alongside him was Brendan Cox, who had been with him at Equinox. After a year at Citronelle, Koslow followed Cox to Circle Bistro as sous chef to Cox’s executive chef. This was a challenge of a different order. The restaurant, located out of the loop on Washington Circle, hadn’t found its place on the dining scene. “We had to make it a place people knew. We had to take something in really bad shape and turn it around.” For the first time, Circle Bistro showed up in Washingtonian’s top 100 restaurants in 2006. “It was very satisfying.”

A little over a year ago, Koslow, ready for the next step, answered an ad in the paper for Mendocino Grille. “I was looking for something that was a real good fit. What I love about the restaurant is it’s very small, very market-driven.”

The first thing he did was rework the menu from scratch. “It took about two, three months, a dish at a time.” He describes his food as “a little more technique-driven. My philosophy hasn’t changed.” And he credits the support of “a very talented sous chef” who helps him do things he calls simple but sophisticated. “I’m a minimalist at heart. I don’t like flashy adornments ... garnishes and powders.”

He says he has taken all the elements he learned in each of his previous positions to create his own style. In the spirit of California, from which the restaurant takes its name, he uses organic produce, naturally raised meats and sustainable fish. He takes pride in doing as much as he can in house, like brining his pork. Currently, he’s working with unusual honeys, flavored with peach and lavender, and considering what he might do

with some of the fresh produce from Path Valley, a Pennsylvania collective of Amish farmers supplying many capital restaurants with “stuff I never heard of.”

If there were just one chef in town whose cooking he would aspire to, it's Frank Ruta at Palena. “I just love his food.” But he doesn't have the opportunity to try it often. This new job is so demanding, he says he barely had time to go with Andrea to visit her mother in Denmark recently. He's glad he did. He squeezes his eyes shut briefly behind his Elvis Costello glasses and murmurs, “Uncle Ludwig's pickled herrings!”

Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar (202-333-2912; <http://www.mendocinodc.com>) is located at 2917 M St. NW. Main courses cost \$24 to \$36.
