

**SONOMA**  
restaurant and wine bar

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**mendocino**  
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**Sonoma Restaurant**  
**Winner, 2007 Neighborhood Restaurant of the Year**  
**Finalist, 2007 People's Favorite Restaurant of the Year**



Chef Drew Trautmann, Owners Eli Hengst and Jared Rager, General Manager Jawad Saadoui

**Congratulations**

**to the 2007 RMMYS Silver Anniversary Winners:**

Fine Dining Restaurant of the Year

**CITYZEN**

Informal Dining Restaurant of the Year

*Tallula*

New Restaurant of the Year

**RASIKA**  
FLAVORS OF INDIA

Neighborhood Gathering Place of the Year

**SONOMA**  
restaurant and wine bar

People's Favorite Restaurant of the Year

*Japanese Taverna*

Duke Zeibert Capital Achievement Award  
Robert Egger

**J.C. Central Kitchen**

Wine and Beverage Program of the Year

restaurant **EVE**

Power Spot of the Year

**GEORGIA BROWN'S**

Chef of the Year  
Cathal Armstrong

restaurant **EVE**

Hottest Bar Scene of the Year

**ZAKATINYA**

Rising Culinary Star of the Year  
Nathan Beauchamp, 1789

*1789 Restaurant*

Manager of the Year  
Ellen Kassoff Gray, Equinox

*Equinox*

Restaurant Employee of the Year  
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2941

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**SUSTAINABLE ISLAND**  
SINCE 1974

Pastry Chef of the Year  
Huw Griffiths, Tabard Inn

**TABARD Inn**



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# The Washington Post

Washington Post Magazine  
September 11, 2005

## California Dreaming: At Sonoma, simple preparations shine

By Tom Sietsema

*"...I'd love to keep Sonoma a secret. But I knew it was too late the day it opened."*

Suddenly, a diner can't turn around in a new restaurant without bumping into charcuterie, plates of artisanal cheeses and more wines by the glass than Baskin-Robbins lists flavors.

Surely you've noticed, too. Every other Washington neighborhood now claims a spot where the vibe is easy and the food leans to the unpretentious (and, typically, Italian). In Cleveland Park, Dino is packing 'em in with antipasti, salumi, panini and a nonsmoking dining room. Over on U Street NW, the two-level Al Crostino is setting out plates of Italian nibbles, plus a few entrees and vino to match. The trend originated when the owners of Mendocino Grille in Georgetown opened a second restaurant on tavern-heavy Capitol Hill this spring and gave it a name that massages the California theme: Sonoma.

Even before a proper sign went up, residents flocked to the bar -- which stocks 30 or so wines in a refrigerated case that also preserves the product once it's opened -- and to the banquette, which runs along the side of the long and narrow dining room. Sonoma is like an Abercrombie & Fitch model: good-looking in a fresh sort of way. From the stenciling on the front window to the walls of brick or slate-blue paint, the design runs simple and handsome. The hostess is as willowy and gorgeous as you'll find downtown, but far friendlier, a theme that continues at the bar, where the guys behind the counter are apt to ask for your name, and extend theirs, as they help you select something to sip.

Conceived by chef Drew Trautmann, who splits his time between Mendocino and Sonoma, the menu practically insists that you share your food with your dining companions. Order some sausage, and it arrives on a butcher block of wood that practically covers the table. There are six meats to consider: prosciutto, salami, speck (smoked prosciutto), mortadella (lightly smoked pork sausage), bresaola (air-dried beef) and a rich chicken liver pâté. Sharing the surface of the board are fat pieces of grilled bread and optional little pots of "accents" -- herbed nuts, pickled red onions, wine-plumped figs -- to spice up the eating. Diners have the choice of three meats (\$19) or the entire roster

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(\$37); in my experience, even the former, or "half" a charcuterie board, is plenty for three to share.

Following the current vogue, the kitchen divides its menu into "firsts" and "seconds," which basically translates into (take your pick) big appetizers or small entrees, some of which can be ordered at double the size if you're not sated by moderate portions.

Pastas make up the bulk of the "firsts," and they include some charmers. Tender gnocchi with bites of tomato is pan-fried, then toasted; the addition of celery and bottarga (dried mullet roe) lend gentle crunch and a mysterious saline edge. Pleasantly chewy risotto, stained black with squid ink, is dressed with calamari and bits of speck. Finished with a knob of butter, the pasta is unabashedly, gloriously rich.

"Seconds" yield a more varied collection of meat and seafood dishes, including a hamburger made with Wagyu beef, prized for its dense marbling, that is sometimes bursting with flavor and other times, frankly, just a burger. I always enjoy its toasted bun and sauteed onions, but not the accompanying heap of roasted and oddly chewy potatoes. Free-range lamb chops are of fine flavor, but so tiny they last only two bites each. I have no qualms about the plump roast chicken, whose flavor is enhanced by a long soak in lemon and in garlic oil; cooked beneath a brick in the oven, this entree -- make that second -- arrives for your viewing pleasure on a soft bed of polenta. And if rockfish caught from local waters is offered, dive in. The kitchen flatters the fish with a loose salad of potatoes and corn in a garlicky mayonnaise swirled with prawn oil. Rosemary-spiked grilled prawns, threaded on a skewer and set on chickpea puree, reveals another pleasure from the waters. A handful of side dishes round out the savory portion of the menu. Sauteed chard with lemon is astringent; polenta enriched with mascarpone is addictive.

Unlike Mendocino Grille, Sonoma revels in what's simple -- and that's meant as a bouquet, not a complaint. So the tomato salad with mozzarella is precisely that, with a shimmering drizzle of fresh basil oil to unite the elements. The joy is in the variety on the plate: The red, deep yellow and pale green tomatoes form an edible rainbow.

A second salad also pays tribute to the garden: crisp green beans moistened with herby creme fraiche set over slices of tomato. Pizzas can be accessorized with the likes of very good boar sausage, ground in-house, and goat cheese from Pennsylvania.

For a place that likes to emphasize its use of local ingredients, it's a bit of a surprise not to find any wines from Virginia on the list here. (In fairness, this oversight is not limited to Sonoma.) And while I think tasting notes can be helpful to patrons, the printed descriptions here are rudimentary and repetitive; better to ask a waiter how an individual wine stands up. Still, it's good to see so many wines offered by the taste, the glass and the bottle, and at least a dozen bottles offered for \$30 or less. The selection of "light, crisp & refreshing whites" is particularly appealing.

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Desserts are decadent. Chocoholics can get their fix with a dark-colored pudding or an ultramoist layered cake. Pistachio ice cream is as dense and chewy as kulfi, India's take on the subject, and it comes with lashings of caramel sauce. Fresh berries are treated to zabaglione, a frothy custard whipped together from egg yolks, marsala and sugar.

At full throttle, Sonoma is uncomfortably loud. Its bare tables are set so close to one another, you have to suck in your stomach -- and worry about your pants meeting up with your neighbor's pizza -- as you slide in and out of your perch. Yet, when I'm drinking a lovely glass of wine for less than the price of a matinee, and polishing off every last strand of pasta from my plate, I'm also pleased to know about an alternative to all the restaurants nearby that are merely cooking in place.

I'd love to keep Sonoma a secret. But I knew it was too late the day it opened.

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# The Washington Post

**Washington Post Magazine  
Sunday, October 29, 2006**

**“A lot to like on the evolving menu at this intimate,  
California-coined restaurant”**

**Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar**

**By Tom Sietsema**

IF YOU'RE A CHEF riding the modern American bandwagon these days, you're offering pork belly on your menu. Chances are also good that at least one of your plates will partner something from the water with something from the land. So here I am at *Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar*, beginning the evening with an appetizer of tender, fat-veined pork belly in a close-knit circle of seared scallops (and sliced, upended leeks). It all adds up to surf and turf of distinction.

In fact, there's a lot to like on the evolving menu at this intimate, California-coined restaurant, where 37-year-old Barry Koslow recently took over the range. Mendocino is his first solo act. (Drew Trautmann remains the executive chef but is also busy with Sonoma, Mendocino's younger sibling on Capitol Hill; so Koslow is free to write the menu). A 2000 graduate of L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg, Koslow has worked for a number of prominent chefs around the city, including the big kahuna at Michel Richard Citronelle. His last gig was at Circle Bistro, where he was No. 2, the sous-chef, under Brendan Cox.

Evidence of his pedigree appears in a number of Koslow's dishes. As with pork belly, tuna carpaccio is commonplace. But Koslow sets his version apart with tiny folds of very good, deep-red fish scattered with marbles of cantaloupe and watermelon, plus a hit of cilantro and a fruity splash of yuzu vinaigrette. The combination is a little sweet and a little meaty, entirely elegant and satisfying. In another happy encounter, crisp romaine is passed over the grill, singeing but not charring the edges, and arranged with hard-cooked eggs, crunchy pine nuts and a potent lemon dressing. The one-two punch of soft smoke and bright citrus in each bite of salad engages the senses in a way that few Caesars do. Koslow makes his own rabbit pâté, which he serves as a big, pistachio-veined triangle striped with a biting violet mustard sauce. Smoky toast points, a pinch of salad and pickled mushrooms broaden the presentation, and the pleasure. Koslow serves up more smoke in a salad of smoked cod, though in this case, the flavor is so intense that it throws everything off balance.

The chef makes hearty look elegant. Autumn is heralded in a ruddy venison chop set atop

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seared slices of sweet Asian pear and tender baby carrots, the meat enhanced with a juniper-spiked sauce. Lamb chops with a drift of sweet potato puree and wrinkled fingers of eggplant are nearly the equal of the aforementioned entrees; chewy edamame (soybeans) keep the entree from more applause. And a vegetarian dish of gnocchi, green beans and tomatoes is fine during the first bite, tiresome by the third. The assembly looks like the kitchen's attempt to use up leftovers.

Three businessmen at a nearby table are complaining. "Can't we get some bread?" one asks a server. A legacy of the Atkins diet craze, warm olives stand in for starch here. That may change, though, as Koslow and his boss tinker with the menu, maybe adding several tasting menus in addition to a la carte choices.

At age nine, Mendocino is no spring chicken, yet it manages to appear youthful. The narrow, low-ceilinged interior opens with a clubby bar and continues with two small dining rooms. Stone, wood and moss-colored banquettes foster a natural look, and whimsy peeks through with a bit of blue sky painted on the wall of the hideaway known as the "alcove." Though tables are close together, there's less of a sense of packing-'em-in, thanks to a few big mirrors, tilted to exaggerate the space and give even people facing a wall the chance to view the room.

Desserts are simple. I like the apple charlotte best. A crisp, sticky-caramel exterior gives way to a center of diced apples, all nicely set off with a scoop of honey ice cream that melts into a lovely sort of creme anglaise as you eat. A diner can also end (or begin) a meal with a selection of cheese and wine; Mendocino prides itself on both. The most indulgent combination might be something blue with something red -- say, a glass of the 2004 Turley "Old Vine" zinfandel, which costs \$16 and delivers a rich taste of California with every sip.

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# WASHINGTONIAN

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**January 2006**



**January 2007**

## **100 Very Best Restaurants: The Finest Dining in Maryland, Virginia, and The District**

### **January 2006: 100 Very Best Restaurants**

**Mendocino Grille: A cozy, Northern California-inspired restaurant wine bar.**

THE SCENE. Don't let the space, a subtly evoked wine cellar with thick wooden beams and stone walls, fool you into thinking that this is just another wine bar. The menu, which marries Californian flexibility with Mediterranean rusticity, is full of fresh ideas, and the atmosphere after a few minutes (and a few sips of wine) begins to seem like an oasis of civility amid the chaotic streets of Georgetown.

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WHAT YOU'LL LOVE. From the bowl of warmed olives offered with drinks to the large selection of affordable wines by the glass (and half-glass), Mendocino pays attention to details. Chef Drew Trautmann's devotion to locally raised, sustainable food shows up in dishes that flaunt the bounties of the seasons.

BEST DISHES: A hearty salt-cod brandade with grilled bread; perfectly fried frog's legs with a tart sauce gribiche; a beautifully roasted organic poussin, served with potatoes and root vegetables; a superb choucroute garni of sauerkraut, duck confit, and sausages.

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### **January 2007: 100 Very Best Restaurants**

A lot of chefs consider fish a poor cousin to meat, which affords greater opportunities for extracting and intensifying flavors. As a result, they often try to force a fish into the role of meat—or go the minimalist route of surrounding a piece of fish with a wan ensemble of vegetable and starch.

Barry Koslow, who took over the kitchen of this Georgetown place last September, does neither. A black sea bass in a broth of mussel juice and saffron with coins of fiery chorizo and braised fennel is that rare fish plate in which all the components are harmonized into a single statement, making you realize that delicacy and lusciousness aren't mutually exclusive. It's a stunner, and much of his other work with fish comes close, including a loin of seared yellowtail with grated ginger and taro root—a dish as lively as the cocktail-party din of the cozy space.

An Alexandria native who apprenticed under Michel Richard, Jonathan Krinn, and Todd Gray, Koslow is a cook's cook, his dishes absent of flash and blind to trends. His background is classical French, but he wears his learning lightly, whether he's turning out a bacon-wrapped wedge of mousseline rabbit pâté, a dark-crust venison chop whose soft interior more closely approximates that of a pork chop, or a breast of duck at least half of whose pleasure is in the skin, as salty and crispy as a bag of chips.

Occasionally he overreaches, as with a parsnip soup topped with smoked oysters, and underreaches, as with a grilled Caesar salad. And his wine-friendly cooking calls for a broader list than the fleshy reds and fuller-bodied whites that are a carryover from management's previous fixation with Napa. But Koslow brings impressive rigor and finesse to what was already a pretty good restaurant, with the promise of more.

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# WASHINGTONIAN

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## Washingtonian Magazine

### Tom Kliman's Online Chat November, 2006

Barry Koslow, the new chef at Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar, does neither. And nowhere so well as with a dish of black sea bass, the thick, white filet pooled in a briny, fragrant broth of mussel juice and saffron and graced by tiny coins of fiery chorizo and braised fennel. It's that rare plate of fish in which all the various components of the dish are harmonized into a single, compelling statement, and you realize that delicacy and lushness shouldn't be mutually exclusive values.

A filet of yellowtail with long beans, slices of taro root and a cap of grated ginger might not reach those heights, but the accoutrements are so smartly handled, so well-harmonized, that you never feel as though the French-trained Koslow is dabbling in Orientalism.

Halibut is among the more difficult fishes for a chef to work with, the virtues of its white, meaty flakiness offset by its lack of flavor. It's a measure of Koslow's skill that he almost succeeds in reviving this over-employed fish – and despite cooking it just past the point of soft lushness on the night I ordered it. The plate was awash with painterly color, a garland of juicy orange segments, sweet roasted beets and braised kohlrabi encircling a plump square of roasted fish.

Koslow even knows when to break his own rules. Tuna carpaccio is the kind of item you have to have on a menu to please the beautiful young things who gather at the bar to sip and graze. But the quality of tuna has declined so much over the last few years, that in all but the most expensive restaurants, it's hardly worth ordering – beautiful to look at, mealy to chew. Koslow grasps that fact, transforming what used to be a showpiece appetizer for many chefs into a seaweed salad, the thin, yuzu-slicked bands of tuna there mostly to provide a textural change of pace.

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# The Washington Post

**Washington Post Food Section  
Wednesday, January 25, 2006**

## **The Half-Glass Makes a Splash**

**By Candy Sagon**

Is the glass half-full? Yes, it is -- and that's a good thing when it comes to wines by the glass at several young, energetic restaurants in the area.

Instead of offering the typical choice of a glass of wine or a bottle, these wine-serious places think customers should be able to order an even smaller serving (for a commensurately smaller price).

The half-glass, or taste, as some restaurants call it, is 2.5 to three ounces of wine -- just enough to sip with an appetizer course and then, perhaps, order another half-glass of a different wine to enjoy with an entree.

"Everyone loves having another option. It lets them try things they've never had," said Danny Boylen, general manager of Notti Bianche, which opened in May near the Kennedy Center and offers 18 wines by the half-glass.

At 6-month-old Sonoma on Capitol Hill, servers will even offer customers a splash of wine to sample if they're having trouble deciding among the 15 whites and 25 reds offered by the half-glass.

It's an even tougher decision at Tallula in Arlington, where all 76 wines offered by the glass are also available by the half-glass, or at Grapeseed in Bethesda, which boasts 95 half-glass choices.

Dino, an Italian restaurant and wine bar that opened in Cleveland Park in July, takes another tack. Nine reds and seven whites are offered in two sizes: a three-ounce pour called an ombra and an eight-ounce carafe called a quartin, which can easily be shared by two people.

"This is the traditional way they do it at the wine bars in Italy," said service director Justin Guthrie. The response from customers, he adds, "has been fantastic. We change our wines by the glass pretty frequently, so this is an opportunity to try a lot of things in quantities you wouldn't normally get."

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People also like being able to taste an expensive wine without having to spring for an entire bottle, said Jeff Heineman, Grapeseed's chef-owner. They might balk at spending \$70 on a bottle of wine they've never tried, but they're willing to spend \$17.50 for a glass or \$8.75 for a taste.

"Customers really embrace the tasting thing," he says. "It just works to let them try more kinds of wine."

Here's a sampling of restaurants in the area offering a generous selection of wines by the half-glass and the glass. A half-glass pour is about three ounces; a traditional glass of wine is about six ounces. (A standard bottle of wine contains about 25 ounces, or enough for about four glasses of wine.)

Sonoma, 223 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, 202-544-8088.

Troy Bock, general manager and sommelier: "We first began doing half-glasses at our sister restaurant, Mendocino, in Georgetown. For this location, we wanted the list to have more Italian wines to go with the food we offer."

Wine list: 15 whites, 25 reds by the half-glass.

One to try: Ajello Furat (\$7 half-glass, \$10 glass). "It's a Sicilian wine, a blend of Nero d'Avola, merlot and syrah and a little cabernet. It has a full-bodied flavor with a little spice."

Perfect match: "The Furat with the Muscovy breast of duck, parsnip puree, mini bok choy and balsamic jus. It's a natural match with the wine's fruit and slightly spicy finish."

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# THE HILL

## CAPITAL LIVING

**The Hill**  
**October 5, 2006**

**By Al Eisele**

*“...it could easily fit in with any bistro in Paris’s Left Bank and is also one of the best and brightest of Capitol Hill’s many eateries.”*

It’s hard to escape the specter of scandal on Capitol Hill these days, as I discovered during two recent visits to the Sonoma Restaurant and Wine Bar, a combination bistro-trattoria, which is just down Pennsylvania Avenue from where former Rep. Mark Foley (R-Fla.) used to do some e-mailing from his office in the Cannon Building.

Last Wednesday, I took three colleagues to dinner at Sonoma after The Hill’s fifth annual Political Book Fair next door at The Trover Shop. We had just finished rubbing shoulders with such Washington household names as Tim Russert, Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), Rep. J. D. Hayworth (R-Ariz.), Ron Suskind, Tom Ricks, Fred Barnes and Peter Bergen, none of whom are involved in any scandals that I know of.

But sitting at a nearby table was former Rep. Tom DeLay (R-Texas), who lost his seat and his job as majority leader last year after a Texas grand jury indicted him on a conspiracy charge stemming from a long-running campaign-finance investigation. I went over to DeLay and wished him well and he graciously took time to come over and chat with us.

Then, Tuesday night, as I was having dinner at the bar, I struck up a conversation with Diana Wallace and Mary Bradley, who were celebrating Wallace’s birthday. Wallace is an assistant to Tony Blankley, former aide to ex-Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) and now editorial page editor of the Washington Times, which had just called for Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) to step down because of his handling, or non-handling, of the Foley scandal.

But I was more interested in what Wallace and Bradley were eating than in discussing the burgeoning Pagegate scandal. They had ordered a mini-version of the charcuterie plate

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(\$19), consisting of grilled bread and three of the six offerings — Amish chicken pate, duck salami and airy slices of braesola (air-dried beef.) You can have all six for \$37. Both assured me their choices were delicious, and I had to agree after they offered me samples.

They weren't as willing to share the accompanying complements, optional tiny portions of pickled scallions (\$3), wine-steeped dried figs (\$3) and truffled baby peaches (\$4), which they had already consumed and raved about, especially the latter.

Meanwhile, I took the bartender's advice and ordered the crab salad as a starter (Chef Drew Trautmann, who splits his time between Sonoma and its sister restaurant Mendocino Grille in Georgetown, divides his menu into four groups: cheeses and charcuterie, handmade pastas and pizzas, wood-grilled meats and fish, and organic salads and produce.)

I'm glad I did as it was nothing short of sensational, consisting of a huge mound of crabmeat atop a delicious salad of arugula, embedded with surgically sliced hearts of palm, beets and surrounded by a half-dozen baby tomatoes cut in half. It was well worth the \$15 tab.

Figuring I was on a roll, I ordered the rib-eye steak (\$21), and a glass of red wine called Hook and Ladder, a blend of cabernet sauvignon and cabernet franc from Sonoma County (\$10), and was not disappointed in either choice. The steak was sliced and cooked perfectly to order, medium rare, and accompanied by foot-long strands of kale and a lovely pesto sauce, an unusual but satisfying combination. The hearty wine held its own against the rib eye. In a burst of generosity, I even shared some of my steak with Ms. Wallace.

On my previous visit, my colleagues and I were seated without reservations, which are usually a must at this popular restaurant frequented by members of Congress and Hill staffers, after choosing not to sit at the outside tables. But only after promising that we'd be out within an hour.

Spurred to eat quickly, we reluctantly passed up the cheese and charcuterie or pizzas. Two of my guests ordered the breaded Niman Ranch pork loin, served with chopped egg, capers and lemon (\$16) and I and my other guest opted for hamburgers made with Wagyu beef (\$13.50), which comes from American cattle that produce a densely marbled meat similar to that of Japan's famed Kobe beef.

My guests pronounced the pork loin an excellent choice, while the Wagyu burger lived up to its reputation. Served with a toasted homemade bun, sliced tomato, grilled onions and roast new potatoes, the meat was bursting with flavor.

I have to say a word about Sonoma's approach to selling wine, which is both innovative and confusing. In order to encourage diners to try various wines from its extensive list of

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more than 200, which is dominated by selections from California and Italy, the restaurant offers 3-ounce “tastes” as well as the standard 6-ounce pourings by the glass and full bottles.

“The way the food menu is set up, we make it so people don’t feel trapped into ordering a bottle but can try different wines, either by the taste or by the glass,” said manager Mike Kuriger, who explained that the menu and wine list are changed almost daily.

That’s fine, but when I took my colleagues from The Hill to dinner, one of them ordered a glass of white wine. When asked her preference by our waiter, she specified chardonnay. Not until after I paid the bill did I notice that I’d been charged \$15 each for her two glasses of Chalk Hill Estate chardonnay.

Chalk Hill, a Sonoma County winery recently bought out by Kendall Jackson, is a perfectly good wine, but not worth \$15 a glass, especially when an even better chardonnay, the Sonoma-Cutrer Russian River Ranches, is available at \$10 per glass. In fact, for only \$15 more than what I paid for two glasses of Chalk Hill, we could have had a bottle of the Sonoma-Cutrer.

The only other quibble I have in my role as a restaurant reviewer is that the noise level can be distractingly high, especially during peak hours, in the long and narrow dining room, which seats about 75 at tables set very close to one another. There’s a much quieter lounge on the second floor.

Sonoma, which occupies a space once filled by celebrity chef Roberto Donna’s Barola, opened for business in June of last year. It bills itself as a great neighborhood restaurant, which it is, but it could easily fit in with any bistro in Paris’s Left Bank and is also one of the best and brightest of Capitol Hill’s many eateries.

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# The Washington Post

**Washington Post Weekend Section  
Friday, December 23, 2005**

## **When the Weather Outside Is Frightful . . .**

**Fritz Hahn**

When warm weather rolls around, I prefer to sit on a patio with a refreshing wheat beer. Falling temperatures mean searching out warming cocktails and crackling fireplaces. Problem is, I'm never the only one with that idea: Chilly nights find crowds packed in the fireplace lounge at the Tabard Inn or huddled near the wood-burning stove in the backroom at Nanny O'Brien's.

When I first visited the upstairs lounge at Sonoma Restaurant and Wine Bar earlier this year, my eye skipped over the airy room's huge windows, exposed brick and gleaming hardwood floors, heading straight for the restored fireplace. One of the servers confirmed that it worked, so I chalked the lounge up as a place to remember for the winter.

Returning after one of our recent ice storms, I was looking forward to warming up while sipping a nice, big red wine.

I came for the fire, but that's just one reason Sonoma's lounge has become a favorite place to meet for drinks on Capitol Hill. Downstairs, the dining room's long bar is often slammed with a combination of groups waiting for tables and oenophiles who've come to sample the three dozen wines available by the glass. Sipping a \$12 glass of some wonderful pinot just isn't as enjoyable when you're standing elbow to elbow jockeying for a seat, but you do get to eavesdrop on some fascinating conversations. ("I had a meeting with the British ambassador this morning, and he asked . . .")

Upstairs, though, it's more relaxed and intimate. As with Sonoma's always-hopping bistro, the lounge has a stylish, uncluttered look: Two huge mirrors lean against slate-gray walls. Lighting is soft. Seating options include boxy modern sofas, boxier armchairs and low leather stools surrounding jet-black coffee tables, all neatly arranged for small groups of friends. Near the fireplace, I'm drawn to soft benches that resemble mattress pads on stumpy metal legs. (Yes, they're just as soft.)

Chairs near those aforementioned windows, which overlook Pennsylvania Avenue, are as coveted as tickets to the State of the Union address.

There are some tradeoffs. Instead of the three dozen wines by the glass available downstairs, you get a choice of four reds (including an oaky '99 Syrah from Sonoma's Bon Family Vineyards), four whites (Rager suggests Margaret's Blend, a blend of Tocai

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Friulano and Arneis from JB Cellars) and one sparkling (a nice little Italian Prosecco).

Those looking for a snack will find they can't order from the full menu; selections are limited to charcuterie platters and cheese plates. It would be too hard to offer 30 more wines by the glass upstairs, Rager says, so "these tend to be the middle and higher end . . . something that will appeal to everyone."

The upstairs lounge will also be getting its own reserve wine list, which may move away from the current Italy- and California-centric selection of bottles. Sonoma, like its sister restaurant Mendocino, also offers one of the better wine deals in town: half-price bottles from the oft-pricey reserve list every Sunday night.

To date, my biggest frustration has been not with service but with the lounge's popularity. On three occasions in recent weeks, I've stopped by to find the second floor closed for private events or holiday parties. "It's not something we're happy about," Rager says. "We were overwhelmed with demand."

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# The Washington Post

Washingtonpost.com

December 23, 2005

## GOING OUT GURUS

### **Fritz 2005 Bests on the Bar Scene: Sonoma Restaurant and Wine Bar**

**Fritz Hahn**

Capitol Hill's newest wine bar offers three dozen by the glasses, but is often Standing Room Only at happy hour. Escape the crowded bar for the classy modern lounge upstairs, outfitted with arty furniture and a working fireplace.

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# ROLL CALL

September 29, 2005

## THE HOT PLATE

### **Sonoma: Worth the Wait Capitol Hill Wine Bar Draws Big Crowd - With Good Reason**

**By Amanda McClements. Special to Roll Call**

**It's a Friday night at Capitol Hill's hottest new hangout, and the bar in the narrow space is packed four deep.** Waiters jostle through the lively crowd, and bartenders pour glass after glass of wine from a sleek case behind the bar. Reservations on weekends are already a must.

It didn't take long for Sonoma, which opened in May, to win the hearts of both the residents who make Capitol Hill their home and those who work here. And with a newly opened upstairs lounge, Sonoma is poised to become an even more appealing neighborhood hangout.

A large part of Sonoma's draw is its user-friendly wine program, which allows diners to buy tastes for just a few dollars. And while it's standard practice to supply a table with one wine list at most restaurants, it struck me as I was taking too much time to read through the list that Sonoma should consider giving each diner a menu. With around 40 wines available by the glass, thanks to the airtight Winekeeper taps behind the bar, chances are you might like to try several different wines over the course of a meal. And having your own wine list would allow you to take your time reading over the selection without holding up the rest of the table.

But let the selfishness end there. Sonoma's menu is designed for diners who like to share and taste multiple dishes during a meal.

The first half of the menu is devoted to a thoughtful selection of cheese and charcuterie, like pate, prosciutto and salami. To accompany the meats and cheeses, the menu also offers "accents," which include housemade wine jellies, herbed nuts and other sweet and savory garnishes. Wine steeped figs and tart pickled local scallions were especially delightful on one visit.

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You could easily make a meal out of platters filled with cheese and meats, as a table next to mine did one night. All heads turned as the waiters delivered two oversized wooden boards, piled high with meats, cheese and bread, to the table. "What's that?" a gentleman seated nearby asked his waiter curiously.

But there's much more to explore on the seasonal menu, which changes frequently. With an admirable commitment to organic and local products, Chef Drew Trautmann has crafted an Italian-accented menu of appetizer-sized "firsts" and larger "seconds."

Following the Italian tradition, pastas make up most of the firsts. Earthy oyster mushrooms pair with cauliflower in a small dish of ravioli, and rustic housemade boar sausage is crumbled atop bucatini.

Highlights among the firsts include an excellent black risotto studded with calamari and tiny chunks of smoked prosciutto, which give the dish a smoky depth, and baby eggplant parmesan, which is thinly sliced and fanned out across the plate.

The kitchen seems to still be working on quality control. One night's ravioli was tender, while another night's was rubbery around the edges. Potato gnocchi were so irregularly shaped that the larger pieces were gummy, while the smaller were nicely done. An aromatic saffron reduction managed to salvage the dish, however.

Of the larger second courses, an expertly cooked whole red snapper stole the show one evening. Its crisp skin was nicely seasoned with salt, pepper and lemon, and its tender white meat was moist and flaky. Other standouts include a tiny quail, glazed with honey mustard and served on a bed of fresh greens, and seared scallops served atop a bright green pea puree.

The only disappointment was marinated octopus with fingerling potatoes and olives. The octopus tasted past its prime.

A collection of simple desserts rounds out the menu. Don't miss the incredibly nutty pistachio ice cream, surrounded by a handful of pistachios and drizzled with caramel. Vanilla panna cotta, another straightforward ending, is enlivened by fresh berries.

If you're not too stuffed, head upstairs for more wine in Sonoma's lounge. The attractive upstairs space, open nightly at 5 p.m., offers creamy, plush couches and low tables for kicking back with a glass of wine. You can bet that a seat in front of the lounge's fireplace will be one of the most sought-after spots in town when the chill of fall sets in. Cheese and charcuterie plates and a limited selection of wines by the glass are also available upstairs.

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For all its early popularity, Sonoma still has more than a few kinks to iron out before it realizes its full potential. The wait staff is casual and friendly, but when the restaurant is slammed, and it often is, inexperience becomes an issue.

But my biggest qualm doesn't relate to food or service, but to the bizarre bathroom setup.

Sonoma's puzzling unisex bathroom on the main floor contains two toilets, partially obscured by partitions - the key word being partially. A sign on the inside of the door instructs patrons to lock the door. This bathroom was built for women who go to the restroom together ... and no one else. "There's always a line," our waitress told us, with a hint of exasperation in her voice. And that line? It forms precariously close to the constantly swinging kitchen doors.

Manager Troy Bock explained that because people were so eager for Sonoma to open, some construction was put on hold in the interest of time. Two more restrooms are in the works upstairs, which should help alleviate the wait for the main floor restroom. "Everything now is still kind of a work in progress," Bock added.

With an improved restroom situation and time to get its staff up to speed, Sonoma should settle into a comfortable groove as the local wine bar so many Capitol Hill neighbors have been dreaming of.

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# The Washington Post

September 21, 2005

## THE WEEKLY DISH

Tom Sietsema

CHANGING SPACES: Along with a bumper crop of promising new restaurants that have popped up on the landscape lately, a handful of established players are making changes that also hint at a more alluring autumn (and beyond) for diners.

Consider Marcel's (2401 Pennsylvania Ave. NW; 202-296-1166) in Washington's West End. In an effort to "tighten things up" after seven years at the formal French-Belgian restaurant, chef-owner Robert Wiedmaier recently added red-and-gold carpet and handcrafted mahogany chairs to the front dining room, along with new china and silverware for the tables. Still to come: a couple of armoires and drapes from France. The waiters at Marcel's have also traded in their tuxes for tailored suits, to "get away from the Old World look," says the chef. For his part, Wiedmaier plans to scale back portion sizes (in response to customer requests, he says) and tweak the bar menu to include more Belgian selections, including mussels with french fries.

In Bethesda, Black's Bar & Kitchen (7750 Woodmont Ave.; 301-652-6278) has closed for lunch as the seafood restaurant begins a "door-to-door makeover" that is expected to cost \$2 million and be completed sometime in the spring, reports owner Jeff Black. The renovation will remove the restaurant's front deck and translate into fewer seats in a more spacious dining room, Black adds. The restaurateur tapped Mallory Buford, his chef at Addie's, Black's modern American restaurant in Rockville, to replace David Craig, who left the restaurant earlier this summer.

**Meanwhile, over on Capitol Hill, Sonoma (223 Pennsylvania Ave. SE; 202-544-8088) unveiled a second-floor, 3,000-square-foot bar and lounge this month. Actually, it's two venues. Open and airy, and dressed with Ultrasuede club chairs and sofas, the larger of the two rooms features arched windows overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue and a working fireplace; the second, smaller space is a shade of burgundy, paved with Oriental rugs and designed for intimate parties. Food upstairs is limited to the restaurant's cheese and charcuterie platters.**

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# The Washington Post

June 8, 2005

## THE WEEKLY DISH

By Tom Sietsema

READY, SET, OPEN: Capitol Hill's newest restaurant, Sonoma (223 Pennsylvania Ave. SE; 202-544-8088), has been serving food to the public since mid-May, but it wasn't until last Friday that its name was displayed out front, and two days ago that the newcomer's co-owner, Jared Rager, finally felt comfortable "letting people in without a disclaimer: 'We're still green.' "

"We're holding ourselves to the standards of [its sibling] Mendocino Grille," the Georgetown restaurant that inspired the 75-seat Sonoma, the restaurateur explains.

The Italian-leaning menu, created by Mendocino Grille executive chef Drew Trautman, appeals to people who like to graze and appreciate designer labels. Thus there are cheese plates and charcuterie boards, appetizer-size pastas and entrees apportioned as if they were first courses. What might be the best burger on the Hill is fashioned with pedigreed (Wagyu) beef; thin-crust pizzas can be topped with the likes of local goat cheese, morel mushrooms and peppery wild-boar sausage. Prawns skewered on rosemary sprigs remind us that the kitchen has some kinks to work out (the accompanying chickpea salad is too cold, with chickpeas that are undercooked).

In contrast with the many pubs that dominate the neighborhood, Sonoma emphasizes wine, with about 25 choices offered by the glass. Can't decide? The servers are happy to offer samples by the shot glass. The bartenders in particular are good ambassadors, eager to steer you to favorite dishes and introduce themselves. "I'm the captain," one of them said to a group of us sitting at the counter, "and he's the cruise director," he added, pointing to a colleague.

The space is spare, modern and cool, with slate-blue walls yielding to exposed brick, and stools and tables in shades of steel. It's also unfinished. Rager promises an upstairs cocktail lounge in the next two weeks, followed later by a more formal dining area.

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# ROLL CALL

**May 5, 2005**

## **THE HOT PLATE**

**By Amanda McClements ROLL CALL STAFF**

**Sonoma Sneak Peek.** In preparation for their grand opening later this month, Sonoma's owners are inviting guests for a preview of the restaurant starting Monday. To be invited for dinner, go to [www.sonomadc.com](http://www.sonomadc.com) and sign up for the preview club.

Sonoma, which is taking over the space formerly occupied by Barolo and Il Radicchio at 223 Pennsylvania Ave. SE, will offer New American cuisine with Italian influences and a focus on local ingredients. On the menu, cheese and charcuterie plates are joined by handmade pastas and pizzas and wood-grilled meats and fish.

A few favorites from Mendocino Grille, the owners' Georgetown restaurant, will also be featured, including a Virginia Wagyu beef burger.

The ground floor, which will open first, will serve as a casual bistro and wine bar, while the upstairs will house a lounge and more formal dining area. Nearly 40 wines will be offered by the glass.

**Drink-o de Mayo.** This afternoon, ties will loosen and tequila will flow as crowds flock to area watering holes to celebrate Cinco de Mayo. What to many is simply a great excuse to party is actually a celebration of Mexico's victory over the French in 1862, so keep that in mind when tipping up that margarita.

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**April 2005**

**WASHINGTON, DC TRAVEL IDEAS**  
**By Christie Matheson**

**Capital Idea**

Forget politics. Here are some new reasons to weekend in Washington. By Christie Matheson

The cherry blossoms are blooming and the weather is at least 10 degrees warmer than in our stubbornly wintry town. But those aren't the only reasons to visit DC this April. The once buttoned-up burg is budding cutting-edge restaurants, shops, museums, and hotels.

**SUP:** At the Mandarin Oriental's dramatic new CityZen, chef Eric Ziebold (formerly of French Laundry) offers sophisticated tasting menus and an 800-bottle wine list. Brand-new hot spot OYA Restaurant & Lounge has a red crocodile bar top and exudes Hollywood-style cool. **For something a bit less glam, check out Sonoma, run by Middlebury grads Eli Hengst and Jared Rager.**

**SEE:** Opened in September, Washington's National Museum of the American Indian is drawing crowds and praise for its architecture and evocative exhibits.

**SHOP:** Sassanova in Georgetown stocks shoes by Christian Lacroix, Emma Hope, and Lulu Guinness. The store also has jewelry from Gerard Yosca, Wendy Mink, and Citrine. If you believe knitting is the new yoga, don't miss a visit to Stitch DC. The new Wisconsin Avenue location sells high-end yarns and offers classes. Can't be bothered to make it yourself? Head to Else for European labels such as Barbara Bui, Vivienne Westwood, Missoni, and Strenesse.

**SLEEP:** We love the terry-cloth robes, free high-speed Internet access, and architectural details of the Penn Quarter's Hotel Monaco. It's pet-friendly, but if you're solo the hotel will lend you a goldfish to keep you company.

CityZen, Mandarin Oriental, 1330 Maryland Ave., SW, 202-787-6006; Else, 3025 M St., NW, 202-333-1211; Hotel Monaco, 700 F St., NW, 202-628-7177; National Museum of the American Indian, 4th St. and Independence Ave., SW, 202-633-1000; OYA Restaurant & Lounge, 777 9th St., NW, 202-393-1400; Sassanova, 1641 Wisconsin Ave., NW, 202-471-4400; **Sonoma, 223 Pennsylvania Ave., SE, 202-544-8088**; Stitch DC, 1071 Wisconsin Ave., NW, 202-333-564

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