

CHEF PROFILE » BARRY KOSLOW



Executive Chef Barry Koslow changes the offerings at the Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar to coincide with the produce in season, supporting local farmers whenever possible. - All photos by Brig Cabe/Examiner

Hitting the right note

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

Youthful, serious, trim, Barry Koslow looks as if he should be poring over ancient Chinese texts rather than over modern-day cookbooks. But the kitchen at Georgetown's Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar has become his proving ground and where Executive Chef Koslow takes a long, lean look at fresh, seasonal ingredients prepared simply. It's really just dinner, Koslow says, trimming away the pomp and circumstance from the menu. And it's a menu that evolves and he changes to reflect what he sees as eight seasons a year; those weeks when some ingredients remain viable — like tomatoes at the tail end of summer — while others are making their marketplace appearance.

"You don't stop using tomatoes when they are still growing," he says.

But cooking wasn't always on his mind. Focused more on making music than on making elegant food, Koslow took to waiting tables to make ends meet when living in Chapel Hill, N.C. As it turns out, one of his roommates was a sous chef at Durham's famous Magnolia Grill and introduced Koslow to many lo-

IF YOU GO
Mendocino Grille and Wine Bar
2917 M St. NW
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Dinners only, starting at 5:30 p.m.

cal chefs. That sparked his interest, and when he returned to live in the D.C. area, he started catering.

"Could I take the grueling aspect of cooking?" he wondered. It turns out he could, and he dropped his budding musical career for this new passion.

After graduating from Gaithersburg's L'Academie de Cuisine, Koslow became single-minded in his pursuit of the best training and mentoring he could acquire.

"I did my externship at Equinox," he says. "This really sounded like what I would want," adding that Todd Gray's insistence on using seasonal and regional goods appealed. After his three-year stint there, Koslow, in conjunction with Pascal Dionot, opened the big, ambitious 2941 restaurant in Falls Church.

"That was very interesting," he says, noting that the experience gave him vital training in kitchen

techniques.

From there, he moved on to work at Michel Richard Citronelle, and found, as the restaurant's eventual poissonier, he had a particular penchant for and skill working with fresh fish.

Next Koslow worked as sous chef at Circle Bistro for two years, a position that readied him to take on his current job, overseeing the Mendocino kitchen and the restaurant's 45-seat dining room.

The son of an Alexandria couple, Koslow says his parents are very proud of his achievements, and probably relieved he found a more stable, non-musical career.

"My dad wasn't too thrilled with my being a musician," he says.

Firmly ensconced in this career, and well-grounded in the local/sustainable philosophy of the restaurant owners, Koslow supports small, local farmers as much as possible.

After all, he says, "Foods in season really taste better," noting that the constantly changing menu forces him to be creative. Maybe that's why he is so proud of this creation: A Japanese bass crusted with hazelnuts and coriander seeds and served with a blood orange vinaigrette. "It comes across as simple, despite the complex yet compatible flavors." Pssst ... Chef, it also comes across as alluring.

IN BARRY'S OWN WORDS



vegetables. Maybe a stir-fry.

What is your comfort food?

It could be anything from a hearty bowl of chicken noodle soup to chili, stews, and brisket and potatoes. Meat and potatoes stewed, that's the ultimate comfort food.

Which are your basic pantry ingredients?

Number one is salt. You can't do anything without it because it brings out natural flavors. Then, onions, garlic, carrots, then whatever is fresh and in season.

Which are your essential cooking tools?

A sharp knife. A nice, big spoon for serving, tasting and plating. Also a Vita-Prep blender.

What's in your fridge?

It's pretty bare. We have sparkling water, white Burgundy, champagne, leftover Chinese food, a bottle of Sriracha and then the basics like eggs, carrots.

Do you cook at home?

My wife and I both cook, but we eat out often because there are so many new restaurants. When we do cook at home, it's a quick dinner based on ingredients picked up from a local farmers market. It will be a very simple fish or organic roast chicken and



BARRY KOSLOW'S PUMPKIN BREAD PUDDING

A good bread pudding is moist, so don't overcook this. Serves 6 to 8

- 11-pound loaf rich egg bread, such as challah or brioche
- 15-ounce can pure pumpkin puree
- 3 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 2 cups whole milk
- 1 cup packed dark brown sugar
- 2 tbsp. dark rum (optional)
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp ground nutmeg
- 1/2 tsp ground ginger
- pinch salt

Preheat the oven to 275 degrees. Cut the bread into 1-inch cubes and set aside. In a large bowl, whisk together the pumpkin puree, eggs, milk, brown sugar, rum, spices and salt. Add the bread cubes, and mix together.

Pour ingredients into a 10-inch springform pan or deep baking dish.

Let stand for 10 minutes to let the bread soak.

Place the pan in a larger pan, and add about 1 inch water; place on a cookie sheet.

Bake until a toothpick or knife inserted into the center comes out clean, about 50 minutes.

HOT BUTTERED RUM SAUCE

The rum sauce can be made up to two days ahead of time. Reheat until just warm.

- 1 stick (4 ounces) unsalted butter
- 1 cup packed dark brown sugar
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 3 tbsp. dark rum

Melt the butter in a medium saucepan. Whisk in the brown sugar and heavy cream. Let the mixture just come to a boil. Let cool a minute, then add the rum.