

FRESH FIND

Maya Kaimal Indian Simmering Sauces: The premium simmering sauces make it easy to enjoy the authentic regional flavors of India. Tamarind Coconut Curry and Tikka Masala are available at Williams-Sonoma. (\$12.50)



GREAT CHEFS@WORK

Taste of Mexico: Alison Swope

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

Down the stairway and to the right, both light and music beckon. Then through the doorway, and presto! Hustle and bustle, laughter and singing — it's banda music, says Alison Swope, standing in her dark chef's garb at the farthest end of the room, past an army of sous chefs and prep people joking in Spanish. As the doyenne of the staff and the head chef in the Mexican restaurant as Andale, Swope looks more like an Irish folk singer than a chef seriously involved with bringing bold, bright Mexican flavors to Washington's food savvy.

As she trims a large box of shiitake mushrooms intended for a weekend special, Swope talks about her passion for cooking, even doing such menial tasks as cutting up veggies.

"I'm a cook," she says, "and this is what I love to do." And a good thing, too, since Swope spends 12 hours a day, five days a week, in the basement of this very popular Seventh Street NW restaurant.

Indeed, Swope is no stranger to hard work or to the restaurant scene in Washington, where she long ago carved her name into the pantheon of celebrity women chefs. In fact, becoming a chef was not a particular goal when she left college. Somewhat introverted, she says, she thought hiding away in the kitchen would help deal with shyness. What she found, instead, was that cooking was very hard work.

As luck would have it, a female colleague taught her some of the basic cooking skills, and after working for several years at a downtown politico hangout, she was given her big break: executive chef of the new — and very trendy — New Heights restaurant on upper Connecticut.



Andale chef Alison Swope makes shrimp empanadas in the kitchen of Andale restaurant in Northwest. — Jay Westcott/Examiner

"That was a turning point in my career," she says, remembering those halcyon days when she took great culinary risks by producing very unconventional dishes. "I did lots of experimenting back then. It was groundbreaking for Washington, but people were open to it. I was 26, and what did I know?" One thing is certain: Old-timers must surely remember fondly her black-bean pâté or the incredible white chocolate cheesecake.

Her next restaurant move to the now-defunct Santa Fe East actually laid the groundwork for her eventual undertaking of cooking and interpreting Mexican recipes. "I probably would not be doing the work at Andale without having worked at Santa Fe East," she says, where one of her signature dishes was duck en-

chiladas. "And until my visit to Mexico, I had no idea of the Mexican element of the Southwestern-style cooking, and how complex it is," she says, adding she became fascinated sampling the just-picked flavors and the history of the cuisine.

Noting that her trip to Oaxaca, Mexico, was an "epiphany" — "I was blown out of the water" — Swope thinks nothing of cooking through 20 pounds of dried chiles each week, ordering fresh goat's milk to make the classic Mexican sweetened dish called cajeta for desserts, or braising and seasoning pork cubes for carnitas. All this adds up to why those seeking tastes of Mexico head to Andale, which translates to "Let's go."

RED SNAPPER CEVICHE

You can serve as a light salad over greens or spoon ceviche onto large homemade tortilla chips to make tostadas.

- 1 lb. fresh red snapper fillet, skin removed, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
- 1 cup fresh lime juice
- 1 large red tomato, diced
- 3 serrano chiles, minced
- 1/2 finely diced onion cup onion
- 1 cup peeled and thinly sliced baby carrots, sliced in thin rounds
- 4 tbsp. coarsely chopped cilantro
- 3/4 tsp. salt
- 1 large ripe avocado, peeled, pitted, and cut into 1/2-inch dice

Place diced fish in a non-aluminum bowl, pour lime juice over fish. Cover and refrigerate for 2 hours, or until fish is no longer opaque. Drain in colander. Toss the remainder of the ingredients with the marinated fish and serve immediately.

Q&A WITH ALISON SWOPE

Q: What are your favorite cookbooks?

A: Rick Bayless' [Mexican] cookbooks. I love all his information and contemporary ideas. Whatever his stream of consciousness is, he gets it into the book.

Q: What do you do on your time off?

A: I don't cook. I love to garden. The kitchen of the restaurant is in the basement, so no window, no fresh air. ... When I am home, I am outside in the garden. No vegetables, all flowers.

Q: Who does the cooking at home?

A: No one. We eat very simply, just grilled foods. That's the way to go, even in the middle of winter.

Q: What has influenced your cooking style the most?

A: My trip to Mexico, and the people [primarily Mexicans] that I work with.

Q: What is your comfort food?

A: A nice piece of marinated carne asada with pinto beans simmered with chorizo sausage and tomatoes.

Q: What is your luckiest moment?

A: The birth of my son.

Q: What foods would you take to a desert island?

A: Red wine, potato chips, and cheese

Q: Would you ever change careers?

A: Oh, no, no. I don't even know what else I would do.

SCOTT GREENBERG *VineGuy*

Raising money and raising glasses go together like wine and cheese

What better way to raise money than by raising a glass of great wine to benefit a great cause? Here is a list of several wine-oriented fundraisers coming up in our community that you can feel great about indulging in.

First up, on March 31 and April 1, MacArthur Beverages presents the 21st annual **California Vintner's Dinner and Barrel Tasting**, featuring the 2004 vintage. The dinner will be on Friday, March 31, while the barrel tasting will take place the next day, both at the Mandarin Oriental. There will be two sessions for the tasting on Saturday: 1-3 p.m. and 7-9 p.m. This very popular event is special since it was the first tasting to offer California wine futures and also raise money for the Addy and Bruce Bassin Memorial Cancer Research Fund, which honors the memory of two men for their commitment to the world of fine wines. For more information, go to www.bassins.com.

A cause that is near and dear to my heart (no pun intended) is **Heart's Delight**, a three-day extravaganza of food and wine to benefit the American Heart Association. This marathon event, held May 11-13, is an opportunity to sample wines from the 2003 vintage in Bordeaux as well as incredible cuisine from nationally acclaimed chefs. Thursday evening offers a series of wine dinners in homes, restaurants and embassies. Friday will feature an exclusive Vintner's Dinner at the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium featuring the wines of Château Margaux, a "first growth" producer. Saturday includes a seated tasting of 30-plus 2003 Bordeaux wines, led by Master of Wine Serena Sutcliffe, followed by a reception featuring food prepared by some of the country's best restaurants, wine from the world's best vineyards and a silent auction. The evening concludes with a live auction, led by Jamie Ritchie of Sotheby's. For ticket information, contact Heidi Arnold at 703-914-3720 or www.heartsdelightwineauction.org.

The third annual **Charity Works "100 Point Wine Night"** wine tasting and dinner will be held on May 19 at the home of Joe Roberts and will feature wines from all around the world that have been rat-

ed 100 Points by Wine Spectator Magazine. D.C. chefs will prepare an unparalleled dinner to complement the wines. The evening will be lead by special guest Thomas Matthews, executive editor of Wine Spectator. This year's proceeds will go to serve more children in the Higher Achievement Program, a results-oriented after school program that helps young people in D.C. For more information, e-mail charityworks@aol.com.

Join Robert M. Parker Jr. and Pierre-Antoine Rovani, authors of the Wine Advocate, for the first annual **Legendary One Hundred Point Wine Weekend** to benefit the Wine Advocate Fund for Philanthropy. The festivities begin Friday, June 2, when His Excellency Jean-David Levitte, the ambassador of France, and Madame Levitte, will host a dinner at their residence. Chef Daniel Boulud of restaurant Daniel in New York, and the ambassador's personal chef, Francis Layrle, will prepare an extraordinary meal matched with wines selected by Parker.

Inaugural co-chairs Rebecca Sanders and Anjanette Murphy continue the celebration on June 3 at The Halcyon House where the Parker-Rovani team will produce an evening of liquid perfection as nationally acclaimed chefs Daniel Boulud and San Francisco restaurateur Nancy Oaks, along with locally celebrated chefs, team up to prepare gastronomic delights. Proceeds will benefit the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute as well as the AppleTree Institute, a new charter school in Washington dedicated to early learning and literacy for disadvantaged preschool children. For information, visit info@wineadvocatefund.org.

So raise your glass and your awareness for great causes in our community. It will give "cheers" a whole new meaning.



Have a wine charity you want to share? E-mail me at scott@vineguy.com.