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Eleven chefs dish on their passions and aversions, their culinary influences and their favorite places to eat, shop and play around town.

by Walter Nicholls

CHEFS HOLD A CERTAIN MYSTIQUE. As the architects of your dining experience, they are seldom seen behind the kitchen's closed doors, although in this area they may well be shopping at the same farmers markets, frequenting the same watering holes, or growing heirloom tomatoes in that luscious backyard garden you pass each time you head out for a run. Where do our town's best chefs go on their days off and their nights out? What do they stock in their pantries at home? And whose cooking do they like the best, other than their own? We talked to a handful of local culinary stars to learn more about the personalities behind the food.

Hoa Lai

Executive chef, Four Sisters, Merrifield.
Lives in: Merrifield, Falls Church.

For the past 10 years, Hoa Lai has been executive chef of what is arguably the most sought-out Vietnamese eatery in the D.C. area. Formerly located at Eden Center, where it was named Huong Que (“essence of home”), his family’s nearly 20-year-old restaurant moved to Merrifield Town Center in the fall of 2008 and rebranded itself as Four Sisters—so named in honor of Lai’s siblings. With Lai at the wok, the kitchen has defined and embraced American/Vietnamese cuisine, melding the family’s Viet and Chinese heritage with French influences from back home. Bringing a light touch and sublime flavors to dishes such as grilled pepper beef and sea bass with black bean sauce, Lai has won the admiration of many fellow culinarians in the region, including Patrick O’Connell, chef and owner of The Inn at Little Washington in Washington, Va., who is a regular customer.

Career influences

My mother taught me everything I know about cooking Vietnamese food. We have similar palates and know how to balance salt and sugar. My father is my biggest critic. He’ll be sure to try my food every so often and let me know what I should change.

Favorite Arlington restaurant

Thai Square on Columbia Pike. The food is consistently good and a wave of nostalgia hits me every time I dine there. It reminds me of how my family started in the restaurant business.

Local market of choice

My family’s deli, Song Que (which means “two homes”), in Eden Center. I like the mango smoothie with tropical jelly.

What’s for breakfast?

Pho, or any type of noodle soup.

Alternative occupation

I’ve always wanted to sell cars. I’m a fast talker and I get a rush out of persuading people to try something they’re unsure about, like a new recipe at the restaurant. Sometimes you have to persuade people and make it sound more appealing.

What I like about Falls Church

I enjoy the diversity. I eat out a lot. There’s a restaurant for every type of cuisine you can imagine within minutes of where I live in Merrifield. I love the Peruvian joint, Super Chicken.

Summer drink

Fresh coconut water—the real thing, not the bottled stuff.

Guilty food pleasure

Bacon and anything with pork fat—on a burger, in fried rice, in a soup. It always tastes good.

Beyond the kitchen

I enjoy basketball and cycling on the W&OD Trail. I also have a newfound appreciation for gardening, growing different types of Japanese maples and hydrangeas.

David Guas

Partner and executive chef,
Bayou Bakery, Courthouse.
Lives in: Chesterbrook Woods, McLean.

New Orleans native David Guas credits his Cuban Abuelo (grandfather) and stateside “Granny” from Amite City, La., as the mentors who gave him an early appreciation for seasonal produce and Cajun flavors. After taking culinary classes in his hometown, he secured a job as assistant pastry chef at the Big Easy’s acclaimed Windsor Court Hotel. The venue’s executive chef at the time, Jeff Tunks, would later invite Guas to Washington to open DC Coast in 1998. As corporate



pastry chef for Tunks’s Passion Food Hospitality (PFH), Guas went on to develop the dessert menus for several of its restaurants, including DC Coast, Ten Penh, Ceiba, Acadiana and PassionFish. Following the 2009 publication of his critically acclaimed cookbook, *Dam Good Sweet: Desserts to Satisfy Your Sweet Tooth, New Orleans Style*, he partnered with PFH to open Bayou Bakery, a sweet and savory café featuring southern comfort fare and desserts such as beignets and chicory-coffee pralines.

Neighborhood favorites

Pupatella Pizza has fantastic, authentic Neapolitan pizza, and their arancini balls (sausage or eggplant) are unbelievable. Thirsty Bernie has the best Reuben sandwich in town, and all of their sausages and meats (by butcher Jamie Stachowski) just hit the spot. I’m



Bayou Bakery creator David Guas loves motorcycles and his own beignets. Other chefs are fans of his New Orleans-style sweets, too.

also a fan of Joe's Burgers in McLean. They grind their meat in-house and have great buns. My pick is the Butcher's Choice with horseradish mustard, caramelized onions and smoked mayo.

Local markets of choice

Lebanese Taverna Market is my go-to spot for last-minute dinners. I hit up the Organic Butcher in McLean whenever I'm looking for something special (their rabbit is incredible). Plaza Latina in Falls Church is where I discovered the bread I now use for all of my sandwiches at Bayou Bakery. They have some of the best blood sausage anywhere.

Local chefs I admire

Enzo Algarme of Pupatella took what he loves from his childhood, brought it to the United States with a food truck

and then turned it into a thriving business. Steve Mannino of Rustico in Ballston was one of the first chefs I met when I started working here in D.C. He makes an unbelievable plate of pasta.

Best-kept food secret

Jason Andelman's Artisan Confections in Clarendon makes some of the best chocolate in the country—right here in our neighborhood.

Signature pastry

Our Dat-O's—oversized homemade Oreos—have become really popular. Some people come every week to get their fix.

Alternative occupation

Carpentry. In college, I worked for a furniture company that made its own pieces. I love working with my hands.

Family dinner favorite

I make these gigantic turkey meatballs with homemade marinara sauce that my wife and sons love.

Beyond the kitchen

I love to ride my motorcycle west to the Shenandoah. Or, sit in a freezing-cold goose blind snacking on some porkorn (popcorn with bacon) waiting for the perfect shot. With the family, we'll take day trips to Great Falls. Just sitting on a rock and watching the rapids flash by on a nice day is awesome.

Childhood memories

From New Orleans: Plum Street Snowballs, apple pie at Hubig's Hand Pies, and buttermilk drops from McKenzie's Bakery (glazed yellow cakes the size of baseballs).