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# CHEF CÉLÈBRE

by Whitney Pipkin



With a new show on the Travel Channel and a second restaurant opening this year, Chef David Guas of Arlington's Bayou Bakery is on a roll.

*Photography by Jen Fariello*

# Serving collards and cappuccinos, beignets and boudin, and grits and grillades out of an order-at-

the-counter kitchen may make a chef sound confused, unless you've met David Guas. For him, the items on the menu at his Bayou Bakery, Coffee Bar & Eatery in Arlington do more than demonstrate his New Orleans roots (and keep diners coming in the door from early morning to late night); they express who he is.

"I've tried to jam what I know about food into a casual operation where no one wants to wait more than eight minutes for a sandwich," Guas says over a cup of coffee, a Mardi Gras-masked gator hanging over his head as the eatery comes to life on a recent Friday morning.

The bakery opens at 7 a.m., when the jazzy riffs of a saxophone waft over the speakers, and freshly ground coffee and pillowy beignets are served piping hot with piles of powdered sugar. Later, around lunch, the bakery will transform into a red beans and rice haunt until dinner time, when salads and hot boudin are plated (instead of boxed to-go) until closing at 9 p.m.

The 39-year-old chef behind it all came to Washington, D.C., from New Orleans at age 23 to serve as the first pastry chef at the seafood restaurant DC Coast. And while Guas may have left his hometown, where he also went to culinary school, he brought its cooking and culture with him.

Guas fell into pastry cheldom after culinary school, because the kitchen at New Orleans' Windsor Court Hotel wasn't hiring; the pastry department, however, was. He served as an associate pastry chef there until Passion Food Hospitality, which now operates seven restaurants in the District, recruited Guas to DC Coast, where he eventually rose to corporate pastry chef before penning his 2009 cookbook, *DamGoodSweet*.

Opening Bayou Bakery in 2010 gave Guas a chance to cook what he knows best. "I think David's talents would be wasted on solely doing pastries," says Guas' friend of more than a decade, David Wizenberg, co-owner of Passion Food Hospitality.

"I don't claim to know how to cook everything," says Guas, "but I definitely know how to cook Louisiana, New Orleans and Southern food. It's not meant to be fussy. That's the beauty of what I do."

And the critics agree. *Bon Appetit*, *Southern Living* and other national magazines have heaped praise upon Guas, and last year *Arlington Magazine* readers voted him the city's best chef. His Muff-a-lotta (the chef's version of the classic New Orleans sandwich), desserts and casual dining ethos have earned him "best of" titles in a slew of publications.

After years of planning, Guas is set to open a second Bayou Bakery by the end of the year at D.C.'s Hill Center at the Old Navy Hospital.

A darling of television media, with his dimpled smile, signature sideburns and charisma, he has competed on cooking shows *Chopped* and *Iron Chef* and regularly appears on *The Today Show* to demonstrate Mardi Gras dishes or, recently, to show viewers how to cook the perfect burger.

When asked to do the burger segment, Guas referenced his logbook of handwritten notes on the subject of the perfect patty, which he grinds himself, blending various meats: "I've got a third chuck, a third brisket, a third spare rib.

"So I present all this to them and they're like, 'Whoa, whoa. We just want something that, like, Mom can do,'" Guas says, recalling a conversation with the show's producers for the 2- to 3-minute segment.

But somehow, his grilling prowess still came through in those few minutes. Last year, the Travel Channel asked Guas to host its new reality show, *American Grilled*, which premiered July 2.

He spent more than five straight weeks traveling to various cities, including Charlottesville and Annapolis, to film the show's 13 episodes in which "regular Joes" from across the country compete for a \$10,000 prize. "He loves this show, because it's so much a part of him. He grew up grilling," says Simone Rathlé, Guas' wife of 14 years, mother of their two children, aged 10 and 12, and his publicist. "He's not branded for just one thing."

Guas learned to grill from his father, Mariano, a home cook and veterinarian by trade whose garlic-studded roast pork grabbed the cover of the *Washington Post's* Thanksgiving edition in 2012. (The *Post* got the idea from a *Food & Wine Magazine* article that followed Guas on a long-planned journey to his father's birthplace in Cuba; a trip finally made possible by a shift in U.S. policy that eased travel restrictions.) As his wife puts it, Guas has "a passion for the origins of things," a passion that originated with the women in his family.

Guas tells stories about his Great Aunt Patty's nutmeg-infused apple pies and his Aunt Boo's legendary wooden roux spoons, which inspired him to



Beignets and coffee along with Bayou Bakery's signature Muff-a-lotta.

Guas has "a passion for the origins of things," a passion that originated with the women in his family.

ban metal spoons at his own restaurant.

"This food is all about soul, right?" Guas says, placing a hand on his chest.

Then, running the hand down his arm to an imaginary stirring spoon, he explains how only wooden spoons can truly conduct heat, flavor and importantly, soul, into the roux that takes two hours to create. The thought of a metal spoon scraping on cast iron makes the chef wince. "There's something disconnected about that," he says.

It's hard to ignore the sizable tattoo peeking out from his T-shirt sleeve as he demonstrates the motion of the spoon. Prompted, he pulls up the sleeve to reveal the boot-shaped state of Louisiana partially covered by the stylized lily of the fleur-de-lis.

"That's my birthplace," he says. "It's where everything I do on a daily basis comes from." [BayouBakeryVa.com](http://BayouBakeryVa.com) ❁