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First Food Critics

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Move over, Zagat. The new force on the dining scene is Michelle and Barack, whose date night took them to a low-key West Village restaurant yesterday. Sandra McElwaine on what the First Foodies like to eat.

Since moving into the White House four months ago, Michelle and Barack Obama have made one thing crystal clear: They have no intention of staying home. Not even in those luxurious digs. As devotees of good food and fine wine, they have decided to shake up the conventional Washington scene by stepping out, having fun—going out on the town. And not to traditional boring embassy functions or the well-appointed homes of desperate hostesses either. The Obamas are genuinely enjoying city life, corralling friends for impromptu forays at an eclectic mix of D.C. restaurants—cutting a wide swath from downtown to the Capitol and DuPont Circle, to Georgetown and even Arlington, Virginia—leaving a gaggle of starstruck proprietors and fellow diners in their glossy wake. (Quite unlike the Bushes, who preferred to hunker down with Tex-Mex inside the confines of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.)

In fact, just this Friday, Obama decided to flee what Harry Truman always referred to as "the great white jail" while filming a news special with NBC anchor Brian Williams. They took off for a Five Guys in South East, where the president dug into a cheeseburger with lettuce, tomato, jalapeno pepper, and mustard. Granted, this penchant for getting around is not new. Both the president and Michelle were regulars on the swanky dining scene back home in Chicago—Obama proposed over dessert at Gordon's (now Naha), one of the chicest watering holes in the Windy City. Both are known to enjoy a wide range of cookery: from artery-blocking hamburgers and fries to Creole and Cajun creations to Southern fare to elegant French haute cuisine.

Whether out for date night or lunch with chums, the restaurant-hopping first couple exude a heady sense of glamour and excitement. Every maitre'd and restaurateur is hoping for a drop-by: After all, the Obama food chain means big bucks. Take Michel Richard's award-winning but pricey Citronelle in Georgetown (dinner for two with wine can hover around \$300). It was packed when it opened 15 years ago, but had recently become somewhat lackluster in both food and service. You could walk in and get a last-minute reservation on almost any evening—that is, until the Obamas arrived a few weeks ago. Now for weekends, reservations are required eight weeks in advance; for weeknights, better book one to two weeks ahead.

Of course, it's impossible to predict when and where they will show up. It's kind of now you see them, now you don't. There is little or no advance warning. Although the White House called Citronelle to make a reservation, no one knew it was for the Obamas until a phalanx of Secret Service officers zoomed in to check out the premises, blocking off part of M Street about an hour ahead of their arrival. Once seated (in a semi-private room), Michelle and the president indulged in straight-up martinis garnished with olives and soft-shell crab tempura. When Michelle requested a lobster burger not on the menu, Chef Richard quickly obliged: "It was impossible to refuse the queen of this country," he explained. The commander in chief opted for 72-hour-aged beef and a single fry. Both ended their meal with crème brûlée, left a 20 percent tip, then headed home for that romantic hand-in-hand stroll around the White House grounds.

The decidedly cheaper and more low-key Ray's Hell Burger in Arlington, Virginia, is still another eatery to attain star status thanks to Obama—ever since he and Vice President Biden sped across the river to make a noon-time pitstop. Located on an obscure shopping strip with no sign (but a long line out front), it is famous with the locals for its no-frills décor and succulent 10 oz. burgers. Needless to say, things have changed since the president stood in that line to order a basic cheddar cheeseburger medium-well, with lettuce and tomato and then asked for fries and Dijon mustard. Neither were available. Now there is a sign inside

warning, “due to media exposure, the wait may be a little longer than normal.” Count on 20-30 minutes at lunch time on weekdays. As for weekends, who knows?

Back in D.C. proper, Obama raised fast-foodie eyes when he waited at the counter at Washington landmark and tourist haven Ben’s Chili Bowl: a ’50s throwback with the original soda fountain, thick milkshakes, and jukebox all intact (the latter now plays CDs). Obama order Ben’s famed chili half-smoke, a grilled half-pork, half-beef sausage on a steamed roll slathered with onions and mustard, and a Diet Coke before sitting down, in the midst of the crowd, to lunch with D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty. Although the owner offered a free meal, Obama picked up the check—and left a \$20 bill before waving and slipping back into his motorcade.

Michelle is also a spur-of-the-moment fast-foodie. She says she likes to sneak out of the White House with the girls and swing over to DuPont Circle, causing temporary gridlock, for a Five Guys burger. Another quick Michelle stop: Good Stuff Eatery on Capitol Hill, where she recently sat upstairs in front a large TV screen and chowed down on an assortment of gourmet burgers with a dozen members of her staff. “It was her idea,” said her press secretary Katie McCormick Lelyveld. “Sometimes you just need a burger.”

Which isn’t to say Michelle doesn’t frequent classy, upscale establishments like B. Smith, a Creole-Cajun emporium housed within an historic Art Deco presidential waiting room in Union Station; or Georgia Brown’s, a downtown Southern-food mecca, where she tried the catfish, fried green tomatoes and bourbon pecan pie; **and Art and Soul, overseen by Art Smith, Obama’s friend and Chicago neighbor, an award-winning cookbook author and former Oprah chef. During a recent outing at Smith’s new Capitol Hill location, other patrons were totally unaware that the first lady, her mother, Marian Robinson, adviser Valerie Jarrett, and social secretary Desiree Rogers were consuming fried chicken and trout until said other patrons decided to use a bathroom. When they did, they found Secret Service officers lurking about and were told they needed to be “wanded” before they could return to their table. “A serious VIP was in the adjoining room.” Still, no one seemed perturbed and everyone cheered the group as they left.**

For the first lady’s 45th birthday, she and the president headed to Equinox, just a stroll across Lafayette Square from the White House. Owned by celebrity chef Todd Gray and his wife Ellen, the trendy white-tablecloth restaurant specializes in seasonal Mid-Atlantic cuisine and has a been favorite for local and international power players for the last decade. Once again, there was little advance notice. The White House made reservations under an assumed name, the Secret Service appeared, poked around the kitchen, and the Obamas showed up with friends and family to dine on Rappahannock fried oysters, strip loin steak, and Michelle’s choice of crispy bananas for dessert. (“We had more security for Shimon Peres,” joked Ellen Gray.)

The Obamas have given the D.C. dining scene new panache. Everyone is waiting, eagerly setting a place, praying for their arrival. The Grays, for one, made the inside track—Todd has Michelle’s cell number!) “Washington is so it now, it’s fabulous,” says Ellen. “It used to be the dullest, dowdiest place on the planet. We’re the new, new cool. The Obamas get it and we get them. They’ve made politics cool and sexy.”

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