

Kitchens Fit for a New Cabinet

By MARIAN BURROS

Washington restaurateurs once rubbed their hands in anticipation of multiple visits from Barack Obama, who reportedly spent many date nights with his wife, Michelle, at Chicago's better eateries. But after 100 days of waiting, the restaurateurs have turned their attention to more junior members of the new administration, as well as to the highly visible new first lady and a guy known simply as Rahm.

The surprise has been that, with the exception of a dinner at Equinox to celebrate Michelle Obama's birthday, days before the Inauguration, the Obamas have turned into homebodies. The president's only other post-election foray into this city's restaurant circuit was a drop-by at Ben's Chili Bowl for its famous chili dog.

Michelle Obama, however, has been more active on the Washington food scene, with which she has something of a history. While she didn't live in Washington during her husband's years as a senator, the couple was sometimes seen together at Georgia Brown's, one of the first restaurants in the city to attract a truly diverse clientele.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first lady has returned to Georgia Brown's in her new role, lunching with Mayor Adrian Fenty; his wife, Michelle; and Jill Biden, the wife of Vice President Joe Biden.

The fare: unreconstructed Southern cooking that sticks to its roots, its dishes seasoned to appeal to everyone, and its fried food coated in thick breading. The price is right, and the place is jammed.

Like Georgia Brown's, B. Smith's in Union Station has welcomed Washingtonians of every hue since it opened 15 years ago. Michelle Obama has been there with her mother and D.C. Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, a regular.

Once the Presidential Suite, where presidents boarded their trains in private, the restaurant's rooms have been restored to their historic grandeur.

And the current chef has restored Southern food to its historic deliciousness. Swamp Thang is brimming with perfectly cooked scallops, shrimp and crawfish, served in a Dijon cream sauce and accompanied by an excellent rendition of collard greens.

The first lady also has gone to lunch with staff. And liking nothing better than a burger and fries, as she said in a recent interview, she ended up at the Five Guys Burgers and Fries chain. She took her new staff to the branch on Connecticut Avenue, where the standard burger is always served well-done, with a wide assortment of toppings — from orange Kraft singles to jalapeños. The fries come with or without Cajun seasoning and range from crisp to not. Personally, I'd rather have the Nathan's hot dog.

There has even been a sighting of Obama daughters Sasha and Malia with Grandma Marian Robinson at the Georgetown branch.

Kenny's Smokehouse was the scene of a lunch for Michelle Obama's campaign staffers. They ordered almost everything

on the menu, from pulled pork to baby back ribs — but no fish, according to Nicky James, the cashier. He and the first lady exchanged hugs.

Best items on the menu: large, juicy, meaty, well-seasoned pork ribs and collard greens.

While the Obamas are eating at home, members of the new administration — from young staffers to the Cabinet secretaries — are doing their share to keep the city's economy going.

Among them, chief of staff Rahm Emanuel is champion. He has eaten out so often — his wife and family are still in Chicago — that restaurateurs now refer to him by his first name.

"Rahm comes in," said a manager at Posto, the administration's hangout of the moment. The sprawling restaurant and bar that accepts no reservations and has no tablecloths is located on up-and-coming 14th Street Northwest, between Logan Circle and the U Street Corridor.

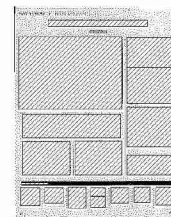


Bistro Bis' Arctic char à la soubise is served with beet couscous, hedgehog mushrooms and spring ramps in an onion emulsion.

A less-expensive sister to Tosca, it has thin-crust pizzas with lots of delicious toppings, beautifully roasted chicken, a well-crafted assortment of pastas and many wines by the glass or the half-bottle.

Its appeal has made fans of White House aides David Axelrod, Jim Messina, Matt Teper, Mona Sutphen and David Medina, as well as Attorney General Eric Holder and Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano.

Just up the street, Cork wine bar holds court in a much smaller,





The Oval Room's sautéed foie gras with pineapple, white chocolate and clove oil

more tightly packed space. The attraction is tasty: small plates like avocado and pistachios on grilled bread and creative flights of wine.

That's where you might find White House stalwarts Medina, Melody Barnes and Bill Burton — not to mention Stevie Wonder, who dropped in the night he received an award from the president.

But for sheer volume of sightings, nothing beats the little stretch of Connecticut Avenue Northwest between H and I streets. Proximity has made The Oval Room, The Bombay Club and Equinox, all serene retreats, popular with White House staff. Rahm and Axelrod like the cozy, upscale Equinox, with its emphasis on local ingredients. The other two restaurants have spruced up their interiors and their menus and have been reborn. The Oval Room is serving elegant, beautifully crafted dishes like red snapper with a basil lime purée and peppers; The Bombay Club has shortened its menu and sharpened its cooking. Obama economic gurus Christina Romer and Peter Orszag, as well as Axelrod, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Energy Secretary Stephen Chu, are fans of one or both.

So, of course, is Rahm.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson, White House social secretary Desiree Rogers and Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner drop in at Central Michel Richard. The restaurant is particularly protective of Geithner, whom other diners often want to talk to.

Rogers has been to Art and Soul.

So has Rahm.

Any story about D.C. celebrity watering holes must include a mention of Cafe Milano, which was recently visited by the Bidens — and where Rogers and White House counselor Valerie Jarrett often pop in.

Rahm, too.

The restaurant is famous for treating unknowns badly because it's so busy coddling celebrities. But times have changed: Even nobodies are being treated well these days.

For the president, we are still left with clues from his eating habits as a senator as indications of which restaurants he might frequent in the future. Sen. Obama was a regular at Bistro Bis, a Capitol Hill restaurant that on any given day has people from the Hill coming and going. (The night I was there, California Democratic Rep. Henry A. Waxman was in the next booth.)

Obama was there as often as twice a week, mostly at breakfast events, but every couple of months he showed up for a strip steak, salad and fries. According to Jeff Buben, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Sallie, an

Obama staffer also came in every Wednesday night for a carryout order of the same. Occasionally, a caramelized apple tart with goat's milk ice cream was added.

The steak has a nice, beefy flavor, and a generous dollop of red-wine-shallot butter makes it irresistible. The *frites* are among the best in town. The salad is dressed with a tangy lemon-tarragon vinaigrette and accompanied by creamy goat cheese fritters. The tart? Perfect.

Don't be surprised if you think you see the president in the restaurant. Don Leak, one of the managers, makes many guests do a double take.

Another faithful patron: Rahm, till he moved across town.

Marian Burros, who reported for The New York Times for 27 years until her retirement last year, is a POLITICO contributor.

OBAMA FAMILY SIGHTINGS

***BISTRO BIS**

Hotel George, 15 E St. N.W.

(202) 661-2700

www.bistrobis.com

Breakfast daily; lunch,

Mon.-Fri.; dinner daily;

brunch, Sat. and Sun.;

dinner entrees \$24-\$33

***EQUINOX**

818 Connecticut Ave. N.W.

(202) 331-8118

www.equinoxrestaurant.com

Lunch, Mon.-Fri.; dinner

daily; dinner entrees \$29-

\$35

B. SMITH'S

Union Station, 50

Massachusetts Ave. N.E.

(202) 289-6188

www.bsmith.com

Lunch, Mon.-Fri.; dinner

daily; brunch, Sat. and

Sun.; dinner entrees

\$19-\$30

GEORGIA

BROWN'S

950 15th St. N.W.

(202) 393-4499

www.gbrowns.com

Lunch, Mon.-Fri.;

dinner daily; brunch,

Sun.; dinner entrees

\$18-\$31

BEN'S CHILI BOWL

1213 U St. N.W.

(202) 667-0909

www.benschilibowl.com

Breakfast, Mon.-Sat.;

lunch and dinner daily;

Ben's Chili Dog \$3.80

KENNY'S

SMOKEHOUSE

732 Maryland Ave. N.E.

(202) 547-4553

Lunch and dinner,

Mon.-Sat.; pork ribs

\$11.50

FIVE GUYS

BURGERS AND

FRIES

1645 Connecticut Ave. N.W.

(202) 328-3483

www.fiveguys.com

Lunch and dinner daily;

hamburger \$4.99

ADMINISTRATION SIGHTINGS

***THE OVAL ROOM**

800 Connecticut Ave. N.W.
(202) 463-8700
www.ovalroom.com
Lunch, Mon.-Fri.; dinner,
Mon.-Sat.; dinner entrees
\$20-\$36

*Rahm Emanuel sightings

***THE BOMBAY CLUB**

815 Connecticut Ave. N.W.

(202) 659-3727
www.bombayclubdc.com
Lunch, Mon.-Fri.; dinner
daily; dinner entrees
\$13-\$24

***POSTO**

1515 14th St. N.W.
(202) 332-8613

www.postodc.com
Dinner daily; dinner
entrees \$11-\$22

CORK WINE BAR

1720 14th St. N.W.

(202) 265-2675

www.corkdc.com

Dinner, Tues.-Sun.;
small plates \$7-\$15

CENTRAL MICHEL RICHARD

1001 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W.
(202) 626-0015

www.centralmichelrichard.com

Lunch, Mon.-Fri.; dinner daily;
dinner entrees \$17-\$35

***CAFE MILANO**

3251 Prospect St. N.W.
(202) 333-6183

www.cafemilano.net

Lunch and dinner daily;
dinner entrees \$16-\$43

***ART AND SOUL**

Liaison Hotel, 415 New
Jersey Ave. N.W.

(202) 393-7777

www.artandsoul.com

Breakfast, Mon.-Fri.; lunch,
Mon.-Fri.; dinner daily;

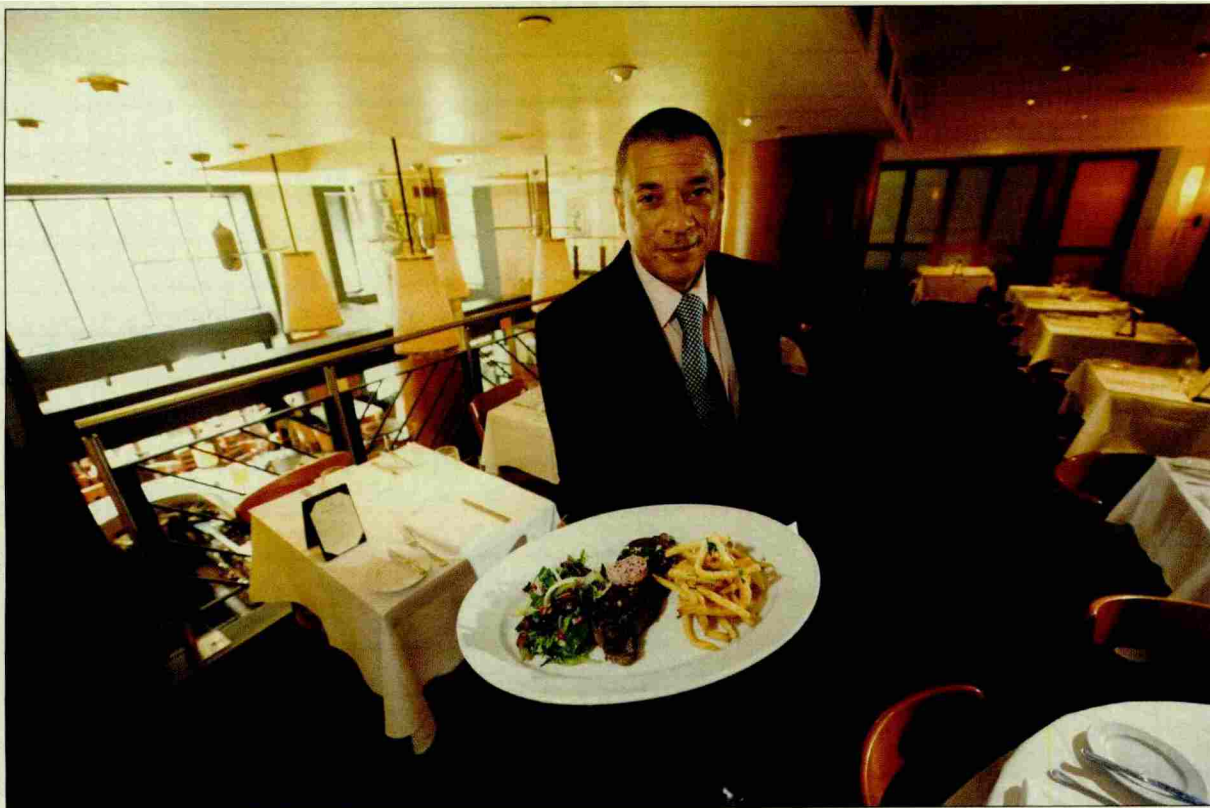
brunch, Sat. and Sun.;

dinner entrees \$18-\$32



Its location near 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue has made the Oval Room especially popular with White House staffers. The restaurant recently updated its interior as well as its menu.

Posto, frequented by Rahm Emanuel and David Axelrod, offers a deconstructed version of tiramisu: mascarpone mousse with coffee gelato and a chocolate shot.



PHOTOS BY JOHN SHINKLE - POLITICO

Don Leak, a manager at Washington's Bistro Bis, holds one of President Barack Obama's go-to dishes from his days in the Senate: steak frites.