

# The Washington Post

## Obamas' Chow: Politically Palatable



Joe Biden and Barack Obama await cheeseburgers at Ray's Hell Burger in Arlington last month. (Pool Photo by Roger L. Wollenberg via Getty Images)

Hamburger lunches from the local carryout joints, the occasional big dinners at white-tablecloth restaurants: On the face of it, **Barack** and **Michelle Obama's** dining-out picks may seem a lot like everyone else's, or at least what we aspire to.

But local gastronomes who've been studying the new first couple's dining habits through four months of restaurant visits -- including the president's Five Guys lunch break on Friday, and the Obamas' trip to N.Y.C.'s chic Blue Hill on Saturday night -- see a pattern of deliberate and politically aware choices.

Time and again, they've picked restaurants with the enviro-fashionable ethos of "sustainable" and "locally grown," in keeping with an agenda that includes vegetable gardens and healthy eating. And whether going high or low, the family that promised to be active members of the local community is gravitating toward places with strong D.C. roots.

"Whoever is doing their scouting work for them is very smart about picking places," said Washington City Paper food columnist **Tim Carman**. "They're very savvy choices about D.C. dining and who's important in it." Food blogger **Amanda McClements** agreed: "They've certainly given themselves some foodie cred in town in a short amount of time."



The president and first lady depart JFK Airport in New York after a night out in Manhattan that included a Broadway play and dinner at Blue Hill. (J. Scott Applewhite/AP)

They've certainly given D.C. foodies a lot to chew on. We haven't had such a going-out president since **George H.W. Bush**, who regularly made the scene at I Ricchi and the Palm downtown, Peking Gourmet Inn in Falls Church and La Chaumière in Georgetown. The **Clintons** made trips to Red Sage and Restaurant Nora. **Laura Bush** had ladies' luncheons all over town but got her husband out to dinner on only a few occasions. (In fairness, **George W. Bush** later said White House food was his favorite part of living there.)

President Obama sent strong signals with his first two D.C. dining picks in the weeks before he took office. First, a lunch with Mayor **Adrian Fenty** at folksy 50-year-old Ben's Chili Bowl on U Street -- "not just a restaurant, but a cultural institution," said Web restaurant critic **Don Rockwell**. ("Could you imagine if he had gone to Bennigan's?")

Days later, for his wife's birthday, dinner at Equinox. Said Carman: "It was a nod to one of the deans of D.C. cooking," chef **Todd Gray**, "the forerunner of the local sustainable movement, so a nice political move." In New York to see "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," the Obamas stopped first at foodie favorite Blue Hill, which touts its reliance on produce and animals raised in the region.

Venturing to the four-star Citronelle last month was a similar move, Carman said, "paying homage to the city's signature chef," **Michel Richard** -- though Rockwell notes it's also a place "used to handling secure situations," such as an **Alan Greenspan/Dick Cheney/Don Rumsfeld** dinner he once witnessed. Absent from the list, Carman notes: popular high-end restaurants like BLT Steak or Olives, which are part of out-of-town chains. However, **Michelle Obama paid allegiance to her home town with an Art and Soul dinner by Chicago chef Art Smith.**

Just after Citronelle, the president and **Joe Biden** made a lunch trip to a casual if haute burger joint, Ray's Hell Burger in Arlington, triggering a media frenzy that, Rockwell said, "quickly erased any memory of fine dining in the public's mind-set" -- while tipping a hat to owner **Michael Landrum**, who has won praise for his plan to open a restaurant in struggling Ward 7. Then on Friday, cheaper burgers at a branch of the Arlington-based Five Guys chain, "the forerunner for the fresh fast-food concept," Carman said.

Is it possible to be too political at mealtime? Thus far, D.C. foodies think it's working for the Obamas. "It's clear they have some savvy food folks on staff, and that's smart," McClements said. "No need to waste precious time on bad food."