

FOOD&WINE



Driss Zahidi is the executive chef at Evo Bistro in McLean.

A trial by fire

Ex-chemist concocts delicious flavors at Moroccan-influenced Evo Bistro in McLean

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

As an amazing success story, consider how this young Moroccan chef who started out his adult life with a master's degree in physics has ended up cooking for one of Northern Virginia's hottest, hippest wine bars and tapas places.

That is the tale of Driss Zahidi, who never attended culinary school and arrived in the United States about 10 years ago. If you've crowded into Evo Bistro in McLean, you quickly grasp that his culinary formula is a winning one.

Take, for example, the fact this two-year-old place has expanded to almost double its original size (the remodeling will be completed this month) and that the rave reviews have poured in, many of which are colorfully posted on the restaurant's walls. Add to that the continual buzz surrounding and filling the place, with seating sometimes nonexistent. (Try late-lunch hours for an easier time of it.)

What you'll find is a flush wine cellar/wine bar to amplify happy hours and mealtimes, and appealing lunch and dinner menus replete with tapas, salads, soups and, especially in the evening, some very approachable entrees of paellas and a Moroccan-inspired tagine of lamb shanks served with couscous. (Hint: Perhaps the most popular dish here is the butternut squash ravioli with sage cream. "We got slammed when we tried to remove it from the menu," Zahidi says.)

Well, Zahidi may not have attended culinary school, but he acknowledges that cooking has always been an activity he pursued just for the pleasure of it.

"My mom," he says, when pushed to say where this passion started. "I was the first child, who is always

What is your comfort food?

Anything grilled. Just simple food, no sauces. And when I am in a good mood, classic Moroccan dishes.

What are your favorite restaurants?

Restaurant Eve in Alexandria. I've been there a few times. And Coastal Flats in Tysons Corner.

What are your favorite cuisines?

Moroccan and then Spanish. I am in love with Spanish food. My mom used to cook paella.

We used to have it twice a month.

Who are your favorite chefs?

I've a few, not just one. When I first got here, I watched Bobby Flay and Emeril. They are still my favorites. I like that Bobby Flay challenge.

What's in your fridge?

Lots of vegetables and maybe a piece of meat, such as a lamb chop or steak. In Morocco, we eat mostly vegetables with just a little meat.

the one who is helping, and that's the tradition. So I helped my mom peel potatoes. And after school, I went to my grandmother's, and she is really a good cook."

Early on, he learned the specifics of various traditional Moroccan dishes, including how to make stews and couscous from scratch.

"That was the beginning," he says.

In high school, he worked in several local restaurants as a line cook. After he had earned his master's degree, Zahidi spent a year in France working as a chemical engineer, and during that time he worked in some local restaurants, a perfect setup for getting to understand the cuisine.

"I learned from one chef and then another," he says.

When he moved to the United States, Zahidi got a job with the now-defunct Le Petit Mistral, also in McLean, where he learned about running the front of the house. And, he quickly added, he learned a lot about what kind of food Americans like. So when the owners planned to open the Corner Bistro (also now defunct) a few doors down, Zahidi joined in to help open the place. A few years later, however, he and his partners moved on to open their own place, and the rest is McLean history.

Throughout his career, Zahidi has kept his culinary skills and imagina-

IF YOU GO
Evo Bistro

- » **Where:** 1313 Old Chain Bridge Road, McLean
- » **Info:** 703-288-4422
- » **Hours:** Lunch — 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; Dinner — 5 to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 5 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday

tion sharpened by reading plenty of cookbooks and by experimenting in the kitchen.

"I play around with Moroccan spices," he says, "and cook dishes that I like for myself." Among those he singles out are the spinach-infused crepes stuffed with crabmeat, the Spanish anchovies served with orange segments and the lamb meatballs with goat cheese.

Now securely in place as a successful chef, Zahidi says his family is pleased with his success. After all, he points out, even though he is not a chemical engineer, he finds that cooking is a bit like mixing chemicals, only more fun. And he keeps his mom involved.

"Sometimes I check with my mother about spices," he says. "And when she comes to town, I cook with her classic Moroccan dishes."

Scott Greenberg » The Vine Guy

Silly names for serious wines

I like words. I like puns and double entendres. I like to play with words, twisting and spinning them into a tangle of silly missives and significant pontifications. Scrabble is my Chinese checkers, and the crossword puzzle is my chessboard. Yes, indeedy-do. I like words. Most of all, I like to take creative license with words. That's why I am in awe of winemakers who like to turn a playful phrase when it comes to naming their wines.

For example, I recently wrote about a series of wines by Kim Longbottom, the producer of Henry's Drive, who names all of the wines in her portfolio based on a postal theme. My favorite name of that particular series — which, unfortunately, is not currently available in our area — is the Postmistress Blanc de Blanc, a sparkling chardonnay that is just a bit "saucy." Another is the Trial of John Montford, named for the man who robbed the mail coach (Henry's Drive) and made off with a bag of loot.

But if we rely on the old adage "you can't judge a book by its cover," then neither should one judge a wine by a clever label or name.

All too often, I have opened a bottle of wine with a cute name or colorful packaging only to discover I was the victim of clever advertising. Nor should consumers fall prey to the recent marketing phenomenon of wine producers placing every manner of cute animal on their labels like some sort of bizarre wine list from Noah's Ark. Evidently — and I am not making this up — recent marketing studies have shown that consumers are more prone to purchasing a wine that sports an animal on its label. Talk about getting the wool pulled over your eyes.

Still, there are some pretty tasty wines with some very clever names out there. It's proof that you don't have to trade in your sense of humor for a sense of good taste. Here are a few of my favorites from tasting notes I have taken throughout the year. Retail prices are approximate.

2008 "Cat Amongst the Pigeons" Unaked Chardonnay, Australia (\$16)

Though I can't find out what's behind the name, I can tell you this "naked" chardonnay lets all of the bright chardonnay fruit shine through, showing off crisp flavors of green apple, nectarine, pear and citrus. The finish has great length and depth, with notes of lemon-lime and tangy tropical fruit.

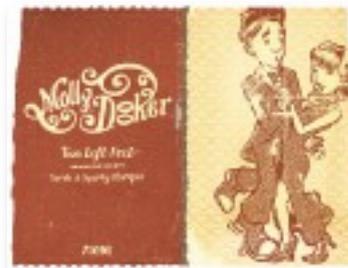
2009 D'Arenberg "Broken Fishplate"

Sauvignon Blanc, Adelaide Hills, Australia (\$18)

According to the winery's Web site, the wine takes its name "as a result of the fishplates which sit in the bottom of the harvester and collect the falling grapes, which are invariably destroyed" due the tight turns the driver has to make on the rugged hillside terrain of the vineyard, located in the Adelaide Hills. Nothing good is easy, and this wine is good. The fragrant bouquet sports scents of tropical fruit, including guava and mango. The abundant acidity keeps the citrusy flavors of mango, lychee and papaya fresh and crisp all the way through to the refreshing finish.

2007 Tait "The Ball Buster" Proprietary Red, Barossa Valley, South Australia (\$20)

The "Ball Buster" is a blend of shiraz, cabernet sauvignon and merlot that really delivers a lot of wine for the money. Scents of casis, blueberry liqueur and toasty oak captivate the nose while lush flavors of ripe blackberry, plum and black raspberry dominate the palate. The rich, chocolatey finish is deep and rich and seems to go on and on. Needless to say, my wife loves the name.



2008 Molly Dooker "Two Left Feet" Red Wine Blend, South Australia (\$25)

The dynamic duo, Sarah and Sparky Marquis — formerly the winemakers at the above mentioned Henry's Drive — know how to make serious wines that are fun to drink. This blend of shiraz, cabernet sauvignon and merlot is full of distinctive scents of black plum, dark chocolate and ripe cherry. The big mouth feel plays up chewy flavors of luscious blackberry, black plum, mocha and roasted coffee. The long finish sports just a hint of melted licorice. As for the label — two tangled-up dancers — Sparky explains, "Sarah loves to dance and I love to dance ... on Sarah's feet."

2007 Armida Winery "Poizin" Zinfandel, Sonoma, Calif. (\$25)

Let's you think that the Aussies get all the fun, this full-bodied zinfandel is from the heart of Dry Creek Valley in Sonoma. According to the Web site, it's "the wine to die for." Well, I don't know about that, but it's definitely worth tracking down. Bright notes of cherry, raspberry and blueberry cover the tongue on a medium-bodied frame. The slightly dusty finish features just a touch of black pepper. Best of all, there are no cute animals on the label. Just a skull and crossbones.