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COLUMN ONE

A table and stage for the Obamas

By eating out often, the president and first lady elevate the restaurant scene in Washington while sending a message about their values.







The Obamas leave dinner at Komi, a Greek and Mediterranean restaurant near Dupont Circle in Washington. (Charles Dharapak / Associated Press / May 7, 2010)

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By Kathleen Hennessey, Tribune Washington Bureau
July 6, 2010 | 4:41 p.m.

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Reporting from Washington — Theirs was a love affair that began in the glow of a candlelit table. It was a white tablecloth and red wine evening. The food was refined, the service impeccable. The private room with the glass door was discreet, but the couple behind it could not go unnoticed.

It's been a year and a half since that meal at Equinox, a chic and sleek restaurant a couple of blocks from the White House, in which Barack and Michelle Obama dined on greens with poached apples and pickled watermelon radish, pan-fried

Rappahannock oysters, all-natural strip loin steak, crispy bananas and zabaglione gelato.

The romance between the Obamas and Washington's foodies has been going strong since.

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This president, like no other in recent memory, appears to be one of us, they say. He seems to know just where the hot spot is. Someone must be whispering in his ear.

Don't even get them started on Michelle, she of the organic garden and state dinner menu designed and cooked by Chicago celebrity chef Rick Bayless.

For a town that for years has tried to upgrade its image from wonky workaholic to cultural sophisticate, the food-friendly Obamas are an opportunity. The couple has made appearances in local restaurants a regular event. Their "date nights" are anticipated occasions for gossip and speculation. Food writers and bloggers attempt to chronicle each bite and morsel. The persistent question raised between sips of Viognier and bites from small plates: "Where will they go next?"

Some claim it can be easy to predict. The Obamas have shown a deliberate and careful — perhaps calculating — approach to dining out. They prefer independents over chains. Locally raised fare over air-shipped. Burger joints over pizza dives (more on that later). Unfussy and modern over wood panels and leather seats.

But they're also hard to pigeonhole. They've dined at established staples (Equinox) and up-and-coming hide-outs (Komi). They've been fed by great chefs (Michel Richard) and grabbed hamburgers to go (Five Guys Burgers).

Much is at stake. A presidential visit can put a restaurant on the map, boost business, bring publicity you can't buy, and — given the first lady's now formal effort to engage chefs in her anti-obesity campaign — spark a door-opening relationship with the first family.

The president and first lady also have cards on the table. They've used restaurants to send a message about their values, their public promotion of healthy eating and their image as a close-knit, average family. Last month, the president used a restaurant for a bit of diplomatic stagecraft when he took off his suit coat and took his Russian counterpart out for a cheeseburger.

The message: U.S.-Russian relations are so calm that the president isn't afraid to get ketchup on his chin. (Of course, this came before the arrests of alleged Russian spies in the U.S.)

The setting was Ray's Hell-Burger, now the most famous hole in the wall in Virginia and one of the few places Obama has visited twice. Since the first presidential visit last year, owner Michael Landrum has opened a fourth restaurant and expanded his original dining room.

"Over a year has passed and we're still scrambling to keep up," Landrum said just a few days before another presidential appearance put his place in the headlines again.

The Obamas' culinary curiosity is most notable in contrast to their immediate predecessors.

Where did the Bushes go?

"That's a rhetorical question, right?" said Lynne Breaux, president of the Restaurant Assn. Metropolitan Washington. "They did not go out."

By his own admission, George W. Bush was a fan of the White House food. His 2003 trip to a neighborhood Mexican restaurant was memorable for its rarity.

But almost every modern White House has had a favorite haunt, and some had several, said Barry Landau, a historian and author of "The President's Table: Two Hundred Years of Dining and Diplomacy."

The choices show how closely presidential preferences track the evolution of American cuisine. No president had a bigger influence than John F. Kennedy, a foodie before the term existed. (He employed a vichyssoise-serving French chef on his campaign plane.) A small explosion of French fare followed the Kennedys to Washington, previously considered a culinary backwater.

Still, the political players were for years primarily drawn to steak-and-chop houses. A Kennedy inaugural party put Paul Young's Restaurant on the map. Lyndon Johnson held court at Duke Zeibert's.

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"Guys' restaurants," Landau said.

Richard Nixon, whose palate Landau describes as underrated, was a devoted fan of the Polynesian-themed Trader Vic's. He liked the mai tais. The Reagans — Nancy more than Ronald — were associated with the Jockey Club, a horse-and-hunt-themed hangout once described in the Washington Post as having the look of "relaxed money."

George H.W. Bush was a restaurant scene regular; the Peking Gourmet Inn in a strip mall in the Virginia suburbs was a favorite. Though Bill Clinton famously had a taste for fast food, his family made regular trips to the Bombay Club near the White House; daughter Chelsea liked Indian.

None of this is uncomplicated, said Walter Scheib, White House chef from 1994 to 2005.

"There's a distinct hassle factor," he said. "You don't just walk down the street and walk in. There's a substantial amount of advance work; you often need a private room. The Secret Service is not real big on the president sitting for any length of time in a hard-to-secure situation."

Reservations mostly are made in another name. A restaurant owner often gets little warning.

Equinox owner Ellen Kassoff Gray had to make a mad dash from a school interview for her son when she heard who was coming to dinner. Her husband, chef Todd Gray, rushed in his whites from a catering job in Virginia. He barely made it into his own restaurant as security began to restrict access.

"We had no time to prepare," Kassoff Gray said. "But it was 10 years in the making."

The day after the June 24 burger summit, another Obama set off a flurry of excitement in a Washington-area restaurant. Michelle Obama was lunching at Proof, a popular spot near Chinatown known for its wine list. Within minutes of her ordering, the world had the details, thanks to the cadre of professional spies who feed such tidbits to the blogosphere: shrimp burger topped with jalapeno, shaved cucumber and pickled daikon; a glass of Martinelli Chardonnay; and chocolate bread pudding.

The lunch capped off a fairly typical month in the food life of this White House. In early June, the first lady invited the best-known restaurant chefs in the country to the South Lawn to kick off an effort to bring healthier food to lunchrooms, an offshoot of her campaign against childhood obesity.

About a week later the president headed to the Gulf of Mexico and lunched at a seaside seafood restaurant in an endorsement of the oil-spill-threatened tourism industry.

Meanwhile, the first lady and her daughters' vacation in Los Angeles was reported in a series of restaurant sightings: slow-roasted lamb at Lucques, hot dogs at Pink's and pizza at Osteria Mozza.

It can be hard to separate the public messaging from the private noshing. The first lady's campaign appears shrewdly aware that her popularity — and interest in her public appearances — is a powerful tool in advancing her agenda.

"Many of the restaurants they go to, they're the sustainable, local and organic: Blue Duck Tavern, Komi. These are all places that trumpet that whole movement," said Nycci Safier Nellis, publisher of TheListAreYouOnIt.com, which tracks the Washington food scene.

Similarly, the president's most publicized dining excursions seem to bolster his image as regular guy. Burgers are a regular staple. A stop at Ben's Chili Bowl. And noticeably, almost no pizza. Perhaps a fear of wading into the debate over Chicago deep dish versus New York thin crust? ("He can't win with the pizza," said Amber Pfau, a restaurant publicist.)

But it's the subtler choices that have Washington's food wags talking. In May, a date night at the 12-table Komi elevated the Obamas to a new level, they say.

The Mediterranean-accented bistro near Dupont Circle is the sort of place described as a gem by those in the know. There's no private room. The leader of the free world ate in the dining room with his wife. The *prix fixe* menu is a \$125 ticket to a sometimes hours-long feast of small courses such as mascarpone-stuffed dates, scallop with dill and black truffle, and spit-roasted goat.

"Among food writers in town the reaction was, 'Gosh, they must have an advisor or something on the

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staff who really knows their stuff,' " said Amanda McClements, a Washington food writer.

Sam Kass, assistant White House chef and now the food initiative coordinator, is often mentioned as a likely reliable restaurant sage. So is Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, a regular in Washington's better restaurants. (He recently celebrated his son's bar mitzvah at Birch & Barley, the hot restaurant and bar of the moment.)

A White House staffer close to the first family said there is no single restaurant guru, but a staff full of people who dine out often and regularly trade suggestions.

"It's something that a lot of us have in common," the staffer said.

That's even better for Washington's foodies.

"That's what I love about these people from Chicago," Safier Nellis said. "They love food."

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