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David Machado: Neighborhood Restaurant Trailblazer

By Lorien Sekora • Photos by Tari Donohue

This Portland chef/restaurateur helped spark the city's growth as a nationally recognized dining destination.

David Machado looks like an easy-going guy. Underneath his quiet presence, however, he is full of energy and focus. An experienced restaurateur, Machado is an innovative leader of Portland's nationally acclaimed dining scene. He was one of the first entrepreneurs to move fine dining from the city's downtown to the outlying neighborhoods, helping spark a flowering of successful community restaurants that continues to spur neighborhood growth and development.

Machado is owner and executive chef of Lauro Mediterranean Kitchen and Vindalho, two of Portland's most critically acclaimed restaurants. Despite his outward calm, Machado has a finely tuned competitive edge. He is a tough customer with the highest of standards, and an employer who refuses to settle for second best.

"I have a slight chip on my shoulder. Every night when we open the restaurant I think, 'We're going to be really busy tonight, but we are also going to be on our game, we are going to deliver really good food.' There is an element of competition. We are competing with ourselves, with the market, and when we open our doors, if you want to eat, I want you to think, 'We're going to Lauro or Vindalho.' We are all competing for people's dining loyalty, and I never lose sight of that. Once my attention to detail goes down, people will notice."

Machado was raised in Fall River, Massachusetts. As a young boy, surrounded by a largely working class culture, he gained not only a profound respect for hard work and what it could yield, but a fascination for the intriguing world that lay beyond the doors of the



David Machado's drive and determination gave his Lauro Mediterranean Kitchen—one of the first fine dining restaurants to find success outside of Portland's downtown core—a national reputation for quality.



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many neighborhood restaurants.

"I found it a wonderment to go into a Lebanese restaurant or a Chinese or Italian restaurant, or even a seafood shack that was frying scallops or clams. I thought all of that was wonderment; this was the greatest thing I had ever seen, all of these wonderful sights and sounds and smells. And these people making this happen—I remember thinking, 'This is a thoroughly human endeavor.'"

Pursuing that endeavor, Machado graduated from the California Culinary Academy in 1986. He arrived in Portland in 1991, working for the Kimpton Group, and helped open the successful Pazzo Ristorante in the Hotel Vintage Plaza. In 1997 he joined the Heathman Group, where he opened Hudson's Bar & Grill at the Heathman Lodge in Vancouver, Washington. Later he conceived and opened to critical success Southpark Seafood Grill & Wine Bar in downtown Portland.

But it was in 2003 that Machado truly struck out in his own direction.

At that time, the corner of Division and 34th Avenue in Portland's Southeast district was barren and nondescript, and the surrounding neighborhood was less than prosperous. Despite such obstacles Machado opened an upscale-yet-informal fine dining restaurant in the middle of summer. His Lauro Mediterranean Kitchen was an

immediate hit with both critics and the local residents. "It was like bringing the mountain to Mohammed," explains Machado. "Up to then people in the neighborhoods of Portland had to go downtown to dine."

The inspiration for Lauro came from the bounty of the Mediterranean: simple, natural ingredients like olives, bread, and wine.

His added twist was in creating a new style of neighborhood restaurant. "My idea was to have an elegant, sophisticated setting with a more intimate feel," says Machado. "The servers would be less formal and the prices reasonable. The food would be made from fresh, regional ingredients of the highest quality."

It sounds almost commonplace today, but it wasn't then. Machado's vision of Lauro, and his faith in the palate of Southeast Portland, proved sound. "Lauro Kitchen's creative play with Mediterranean flavors revitalizes the casual neighborhood bistro," said *Willamette Week*, as it named Lauro restaurant of the year in 2004.

But Lauro did more than just satisfy diners and critics. It also brought new life and interest to the surrounding neighborhood, prompting additional business development and public attention, as well as providing an example to others. Writing about this in *The Oregonian* in February 2008, writer Tom Hallman noted that "in recent years, a street's revival can be traced to a neighborhood's restaurant." Lauro Mediterranean Kitchen was the prototype of this phenomenon.

Machado has long had a clear idea of what makes a restaurant successful. Cory Schreiber, founder of Wildwood Restaurant and currently School Program Manager for

the Oregon Department of Agriculture, is a longtime friend and colleague. "David displays a wide angle lens of knowledge of all the intricacies of the food market. But at the same time, he's able to keep the whole picture in mind. He doesn't get caught up in his own greatness. He knows that tomorrow's another day and you've got to prove it again and again."

Proving himself again and again seems to be a Machado motif. He continues to challenge himself, exploring different ways to broaden both his culinary repertoire and his presence in the public eye. In October of 2005 he opened Vindalho, offering neighborhood diners a reinterpretation of classic Indian dishes he calls "Spice Route Cuisine."

"What I am doing with Vindalho is trying to take authentic recipes and make them contemporary, modernize them in terms of ingredients, and how we as people eat now," Machado explains. "At Vindalho we try and temper traditional Indian cuisine with a regional, seasonal, modern approach."

As with many of his previous restaurants, Machado's concept has attracted national attention: *Gourmet* magazine featured Vindalho as one of America's best restaurants in 2007, and it was included in a recent *New York Times* article on Portland dining.

If one were to ask Machado why he does what he does, which is to firmly propel his restaurants up and up until they reach a crescendo pitch of humming, bustling success, he will quickly refuse any aspirations of wealth. "I don't do it to make money, I don't do it to be famous. My goal is to move the industry forward, to make it more professional, more legitimate."

If the past is any indication, David Machado will be influencing the Northwest's restaurant scene for a long time to come.



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