

Sebastien Watteau: DC's Very Own 'French-Mex' Chef

“If you had to choose between French and Mexican cuisine, which would you pick?” I asked Sebastien Watteau.

“It would break my heart to have to make a choice,” he replied.

Watteau, an executive chef who currently runs one of the restaurants at Bethesda's National Institutes of Health (feeding postdocs from all over the world), is an expert in both French and Mexican cuisines, with a diverse and intriguing culinary career.

Born in the Loire Valley in France (to a mother from Campaigne, a region known for foie gras, truffles, and the famous Limousin beef cattle), Watteau moved to Mexico at the age of six months with his parents, who worked for Alliance Française (a French cultural organization). He spent his childhood in Mexico with the exception of his sixth grade year, when he lived in the border town of McAllen, Texas.

Having experienced as a child some of the best hospitality that Mexico had to offer — he remembers in particular Club Maeva, a spectacular beach resort in Manzanillo, Mexico — Watteau had his heart set on working in the industry from a young age. He commenced his hospitality career soon after graduating from high school, at a hotel in San Diego.

After a brief stint at a hospitality school in Seville, Spain, Watteau returned to France to complete his mandatory military service, ending up as a cook in a hotel for high-ranking military officers.

Watteau then returned to McAllen, where his mom was living, and enrolled at Texas State Technical College where he completed an Associate's degree in Food Service.



The entrepreneurial bug soon took hold, and not long after his graduation the 23-year-old Watteau — together with his mother — bought a small sandwich shop called The Gourmet Shop in Hidalgo County, Texas. They turned it into a French restaurant (13 tables, two cooks and two servers) which operated successfully for several years.

Watteau sold The Gourmet Shop to open The Creamery, a 188-seat eatery in Edinburg, Texas. The much-beloved restaurant received a great deal of local press and featured Watteau's unique culinary creations (such as the fajita burger).

Over the years Watteau continued to rise through the ranks of the food and beverage (F&B) industry. He worked for a time as the executive chef, and then F&B director for La Posada Hotel in Laredo, Texas. He was F&B director at several other properties until 2001, when life brought him to the DC area.

The 888-room Grand Hyatt on H Street NW — where Watteau served as director of outlets — was his first stop in DC; he also worked as F&B director at the Hilton Fairfax and chef production manager at the University of Maryland, before he commenced a challenging culinary role at the Maryland Jockey Club which operates Pimlico race course in Baltimore (home of the Preakness Stakes) and Laurel Park race course in Laurel, Md.

The Maryland Jockey Club is a massive operation with more than 600 employees, sometimes serving more than 100,000 guests in a single day. According to Watteau, due to the sheer size of the operation, sometimes even supplying change for the cash registers is a logistical challenge.

His time with the Maryland Jockey

Club was impressive, but then Watteau outdid even himself with his next gig as a contract chef working alongside White House Chef Cristeta Comerford executing food prep for various social events for the First Family (4th of July, Presidents Day, state dinners, Christmas).

He has also served as a culinary instructor in the adult education program at Carlos Rosario School in DC.

Watteau describes his own culinary style as a fusion between the cultures he knows and loves; his three favorite cuisines are Spanish, Mexican and French. Some of his dishes that showcase his unique culinary style are scallops with Yucatan sauce, and bone marrow reduction with a homemade tortilla.

When I asked about his favorite restaurants in the area he named Jaleo, as well as the now-shuttered Sol de Espana in Rockville. In the end though, if given the choice, Watteau says he would much rather be doing the thing he loves — cooking — at home, with his friends and family.

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