

The Hungry Traveler: Capitol Cravings
By Lydia Itoi
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When traveling anywhere, I contact everyone I know who might have the inside line on the best places to eat at my destination. So before heading to our nation's capital, I called the ultimate insiders: our local Bay Area congressional representatives.

The problem was that some were not at all eager to be labeled Washington insiders. Despite nine years on Capitol Hill, Rep. Anna Eshoo of the 14th Congressional District considers herself a displaced Californian, down to her dining preferences. "I come home to Palo Alto every weekend," she said. "I don't like most of the food in Washington. It's heavier and overly decorated without being good." She prefers healthy soups and fresh, California ingredients. When asked for restaurant recommendations, she stuck to hometown favorites like Max's Opera House Café or Peninsula Creamery, "dinky, uncluttered places" that sell fresh fish on the coast, and brunch at the Ingleside Café on El Camino in San Carlos after Sunday Mass.

But what about Washington? Surely there must be something for a hungry constituent to eat while in town. "When I'm in Washington, usually I'm so busy that I eat at my desk and don't come home until 11:00 at night," said the congresswoman, claiming complete ignorance of the Washington dining scene. "I'm so hungry that I'll eat whatever." Despite what people may imagine of the glamorous life of elected officials, Rep. Eshoo insists that there is little wining and dining for her inside the Beltway. Indeed, she has lately been hard at work on new legislation, The Meat and Poultry Pathogen Reduction and Enforcement Act, to make sure food is safe, even if she isn't getting to eat much of it herself.

Rep. Eshoo's description of the daily food life of the average member of Congress was downright depressing, enough to make the most hardened partisan crave some good home cooking. The congressional diet seems to consist of too much takeout from Hunan, a Chinese restaurant nearby, mediocre bites snatched from office cafeterias, and monotonous Capitol catering. Leisurely meals to discuss important issues are made impossible by incessant calls to vote. House Democratic Whip Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco corroborates this bleak picture, telling *Washingtonian Magazine* that she does not remember the last time she went out for lunch. She eats either at her desk or in the House of Representatives Members' Dining Room. For senators, when matters get desperate, there is always the "Candy Desk," the last desk on the Republican aisle of the Senate chamber that is traditionally kept stocked with assorted sweets, often with the help of the National Confectioners Association and the Chocolate Manufacturers Association. (In my personal playbook, hitting a senator weakened by low blood sugar with a bonbon is a particularly egregious example of political influence peddling by special interests.)

To give me a taste of Capitol Hill cuisine, Anna Eshoo's office arranged lunch in the House Members' Dining Room, specifically to try the famed House Bean Soup. "I think George Washington made the soup, and they're still serving it," grouched Rep. Eshoo, by way of fair warning. The smoky, white bean soup has been served in the Dining Room for well over a hundred years, and it has been a daily fixture on the menu ever since House Speaker Joseph Cannon ordered it on a humid summer day in 1904 and demanded it be available year round.

Despite the gracious surroundings and illustrious clientele, the Dining Room lunch menu was just slightly more inspired than that of a truck stop, at prices we have not seen in Silicon Valley in years. House members can select from the usual array of deli sandwiches and salads; in addition to the daily Blue Plate Special, the hot entrees include the requisite steak, salmon, and chicken. The grilled Black Angus hamburger goes for \$5.50, the house salad for \$3.25. The infamous bean soup, which was not nearly as bad as Rep. Eshoo led me to fear, can be had for \$1.50 a cup or \$1.95 for a bowl. Creamy white Michigan beans are soaked overnight, then simmered about four hours with a smoked ham hock and lightly crushed with a spoon. Like many middle Americans, it is hearty and straightforward.

Off of the Hill, the restaurant choices of politicians usually reflected their own backgrounds. Perhaps the growing emergence of women and minorities in Congress, led by a diverse and gastronomically sophisticated Northern California delegation, will help Washington continue to evolve from its stolid filet-mignon culture. Fun-loving freshman Rep. Mike Honda of San Jose, a Japanese-American former educator who learned Spanish in El Salvador with the Peace Corps, recommends platanos and pupusas at Tamarindo in the hip, ethnically rich Adams-Morgan neighborhood. He also likes to take visitors for a round of sushi, sake and karaoke at Café Japone.

Italian-American Nancy Pelosi, the highest-ranking congresswoman in U.S. history, says to “follow the pasta,” and her favorite places are Primi Piatti and Sesto Senso, a choice seconded by Anna Eshoo. By day, the casually upscale, saffron-colored dining room of Sesto Senso serves up wood-fired pizza and well-executed handmade pastas to a conservatively dressed clientele, but at night it turns into a Euro-pop dance club. For special occasions, Rep. Pelosi remains true to her roots with her choice of chef Roberto Donna’s Galileo, Washington’s premier Northern Italian dining spot.

Even President George W. Bush is leaving his culinary imprint on the capital, installing a branch of his favorite Austin restaurant at the Watergate Hotel even before his Cabinet was fully in place. The dining room overlooking the Potomac that was once home to Washington’s highest-ranked chef, the late Jean-Louis Palladin, now serves up contemporary black bean empanadas and smoked salmon chalupas to administration insiders and a Washingtonian public wary of hot chilies. Jeffrey’s at the Watergate has very close ties with the Bush administration. Co-owner Peggy Weiss and First Lady Laura Bush went to school together, and there is a Roquefort and tomato salad created by Secretary of Commerce Donald Evans. National Security Advisor and former Stanford University provost Condoleeza Rice favors the lemon meringue tart so much that it is named after her. When the president comes to dine at Jeffrey’s, executive chef David Garrido makes sure that “Crispy Texas Gulf Oysters on Yucca Root Chips with **Habanero** Honey Aioli” are waiting for him on the table. I sampled the oysters, flown in from Texas in a fit of regional pride and coated with a preternaturally mild-mannered **habanero** mayonnaise, while listening to the manager describe some of the security measures taken before a presidential visit. Several days before the meal, Secret Service agents review the restaurant and station themselves in the kitchen to observe all of the preparations, maybe even learn a recipe or two. Precise presidential dinner plans are often a state secret, sometimes even from the President himself.

Beyond the now tightly patrolled corridors of power, there are of course the restaurants that cater to the young, transient hordes of staffers on Capitol Hill. Ernest

Baynard, now communications director for Rep. Honda, has been going to Felix since the days when it was a hangout for the junior turks of the Clinton era. It is the sort of place that goes out of its way to make a hardworking, style-conscious, perhaps over-idealistic and underpaid political foot soldier feel both important and at home. Some of my D.C.-dwelling friends cynically suggest that it may also be the place to pick up an intern over one of Felix's signature martinis. Yet Felix seems to wear many faces. On this Monday evening, the long, narrow dining room is an intimate, somewhat dim place for drinks and dinner, but I understand that on weekends, the tables get pushed back and the party climbs upstairs and spills over into the new bar across the hall. On Friday nights, Felix's self-consciously trendy menu of seared yellowfin with wasabi crème fraîche and Vidalia onion champagne bisque with oysters and white truffle oil gives way to a traditional, comfort-laden Shabbat dinner with all the trimmings. Wednesday is Sinatra Night.

Although boosters claim that D.C. no longer deserves its reputation as a gastronomic gulag, I see what Anna Eshoo means when she says Washington food is heavy and overly decorated. While there is certainly evidence of health-conscious trends and cutting-edge culinary influences on current Washington menus, generally speaking, there is still an awful lot of cream in everything. Also, beneath the window dressing of elaborate menu theatrics, a large number of restaurants have not moved very far from the pollster-prescribed platform of steak, chicken, salmon, and crab cakes. The emphasis on drinks and atmosphere at popular political watering holes makes me suspect that people are still too busy playing the room to pay enough attention to the food.

That is not to suggest that there is no good food in Washington. As I suspected, the people who eat best are lobbyists and expense account travelers. Bay Area expats would feel at home in front of the pricey but pedigreed California-French tasting menus of Citronelle, Michel Richard's snazzy L.A. import. When in D.C., I stay at the modest but comfortably appointed Latham Hotel, a favorite among visiting diplomats from small countries. It is excellently located in the heart of Georgetown, with Citronelle as the in-house restaurant. Sushi-ko, also in Georgetown, does some interesting experiments pairing nouvelle sushi with Burgundy wines.

Some of my favorite Washington eateries have a stuffy but romantic Old World formality and old-fashioned flavor. Taberna del Alabardero is literally straight out of Seville, where its Michelin-starred sister resides, after a brief tasting detour through France. The smart hungry traveler will arrange to arrive early and settle down with a good sherry and a tapa to wait for dinner companions to arrive. He or she can then spend the time agonizing at leisure whether to have the *higado de pato* (foie gras) or the rice with snails, the monkfish or the partridge in *piquillo* sauce. It is an exquisite dilemma. On Thursdays, I go to La Chaumiere for classic, no-holds-barred *cassoulet Toulousain*; any other day of the week, I have the *quenelles de brochet*, pillowy pike dumplings in millionaire lobster sauce. In either case, the evening always ends with the Grand Marnier soufflé.

A boon to budget travelers is the fact that immigrants of all political and national stripes come to Washington and open restaurants. Thoi Van Nguyen, owner of the popular Nam Viet restaurants in Arlington and Washington, served in the 21st Infantry Division in his native Vietnam. There he had known General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, made infamous by the Eddie Adams photo of his point-blank execution of a Viet Cong

prisoner. The general also moved to the U.S. and ran a deli in nearby Springfield when he died.

But life in D.C. is not all politics. Just outside the Beltway in the Koreatown around Little River Turnpike, my friend Tobie, a professor of Chinese history at Johns Hopkins, and her academic set have developed their own dining out ritual. They order the special set menu at Yechon, a lavish but very reasonably priced spread that includes seafood soup, several kinds of Korean barbecue and grilled lobster, and follow it with a selection of rich, plump baklava from Samadi Sweets Café in Falls Church. It makes sense to me.

Rep. Mike Honda Recommends:

Café Japone, 2032 P St. NW, Washington DC (Dupont Circle) 202-466-2172. Prime spot where the Congressman brings friends, colleagues and staff for karaoke—sushi and sake the preferred fare here.

Felix, 2406 18th St. NW, Washington DC (Adams-Morgan) 202-483-3549. New American restaurant known for its martinis and happening atmosphere. The Congressman's staff Christmas party was held here last year.

El Tamarindo, 7331 Georgia Ave. NW, Washington, DC (Adams-Morgan) 202-291-0525. The plantains and pupusas remind the Congressman of his time in El Salvador. Cash only.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi Recommends:

Galileo, 1110 21st St. NW, Washington DC, 202-293-7191. The House Whip says this upscale, traditional Northern Italian spot is for special occasions.

Primi Piatti, 2013 I St. NW, Washington DC, 202-223-3600. "Follow the pasta."

Sesto Senso, 1214 18th St. NW, Washington DC (Dupont Circle) 202-785-9525. Casually elegant Italian trattoria also gets the vote of Rep. Anna Eshoo. Rep. Pelosi especially likes the bruschetta pizza (not available when the H.T. visited).

The Bush Administration Recommends:

Jeffrey's at the Watergate, 2650 Virginia Ave. NW, Washington DC (Watergate complex) 202-298-4455. Oysters and beef are flown in from Texas, as well as a few friends of the President's, the owners. Contemporary French-Tex (not Tex-Mex) cuisine with a lovely view of the Potomac. Convenient to the Kennedy Center.

The Hungry Traveler Recommends:

La Chaumiere, 2813 M St. NW, Washington DC (Georgetown), 202-338-1784.
Romantic, rustic, but somewhat stuffy French restaurant serves killer cassoulet on Thursdays and quenelles de brochet. I crave the Grand Marnier soufflé.

Ching Ching Cha, 1063 Wisconsin Ave., Washington DC (Georgetown), 202-333-8288.
Tranquil, Chinese-style tea room offers haven from political unrest. Nice selection of loose-leaf teas served in delicate, lidded porcelain cups, light Asian afternoon tea snacks available. Tea and tea implements for sale.

Citronelle, 3000 M St, NW, Washington DC (Georgetown), 202-625-2150. High-concept California-French cuisine upholstered in pastel leather with an open kitchen for full theatrical effect. The squab four ways was particularly nice, although the overall meal may have been too expensive for what it was.

Sushi-ko, 2309 Wisconsin Ave NW, Washington DC (Georgetown), 202-333-4187.
Good sushi and innovative Japanese-inspired small dishes recall tapas and are designed to complement Burgundies.

Taberna del Alabardero, 1776 I St. at 18th St. NW, Washington DC, 202-429-2200.
Formal yet romantic traditional Spanish restaurant with tapas bar and extensive list of Spanish wines. No lunch Sat., closed Sun.

Yechon, 4121 Hummer Road, Annandale VA, 703-914-4646. Nicely appointed Korean and Japanese restaurant specializing in barbecue cooked at the table. Set menus are good value.