

Getting to Know John Mooney of Bidwell

By Rina Rapuano
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DC diners may remember chef and restaurateur John Mooney from his days of cooking at the well-known Red Sage, which closed in 2006, and Raku before he headed off to run kitchens in New York, India and Dublin.

Tonight marks his official return with the opening of Bidwell in Union Market. Mooney also owns Bell, Book & Candle in New York City's West Village, where he launched many of the signature dishes that will be served at Bidwell - and employs the same aeroponic vertical gardening system he will use to source ingredients for both restaurants.

The fast talking, wise-cracking fan of rosé isn't growing anything in that garden just yet but plans to get the ball rolling with that come March. Until then, he'll rely somewhat on his fellow Union Market folks for sourcing ingredients - and they have been quite happy to help.

Mooney's hope for the restaurant, named for a U.S. Army general who was an avid Californian farmer in the 1800s, is that it will feel fun and social with food that is homey yet eccentric. Here's what else you can expect from his newest endeavor - and the chef, himself:

What do you plan to grow in the rooftop garden?

Oh, everything. Edible flowers like nasturtium, every herb you can imagine like purple basil, spearmint, thyme. At my other restaurant in New York, I grew 15 kinds of tomatoes last summer. We will grow the Bidwell melon here, too. It's an heirloom melon more like a cantaloupe, with a firm texture. The logo is actually a Bidwell melon cut in half. Tomatillos, okra, eggplant, zucchini, strawberries ... I grow a lot of interesting heirlooms like red okra, purple tomatillo.

Describe how your cooking philosophy will inform the Bidwell menu:

It's all American - contemporary, though. I do like the South and I do like the Southwest, but I like to use domestic ingredients [in general]. It's all ingredient-focused. I leave everything as close to its natural form as possible. When the garden's really cranking, a lot of the dishes will be subject to what's good. I make all the bread; the sausage is made and smoked in-house; all the condiments are made in-house - mustard, dressings, everything. For instance, I make an old-school Thousand Island dressing - so, things that people are familiar with but not in an industrial food form.

What are you sourcing from Union Market vendors?

I get my cheese from Righteous Cheese. Dolcezza is making my ice creams. I had set up to make all my ice creams myself, but his product is so good I thought I'd save the money and use his. The guys from Harvey's Market. They bring a lot of stuff in from sources, and we'll share that - like game from Virginia; the beef's local, too. Those guys have such a deep relationship with everyone, and they've been very helpful.

Which three dishes are you most excited for diners to try?

There are a couple of signatures. The lobster taco is definitely one of them. Another one that gets so much mileage is our crispy deviled egg. People go nuts for it. Our burger is interesting - that's a patty melt. We use a seeded square rye, a square patty, Thousand Island dressing and caramelized onions, all griddled. I tell people it's what happens when a cheeseburger makes love to a grilled cheese.

What restaurant or dish did you miss most after leaving DC?

I missed the one that I worked in! I don't want to get all sentimental, but we really had a great time.

What's your go-to bar order?

For me, it's soup of the day. (That's a dirty martini with blue-cheese stuffed olives.)

What's your late-night-food guilty pleasure?

Tacos. I love Mexican food. I associate that with a grungy little hole-in-the-wall place that serves cheap beer and food. That's the cook's pleasure. I love good pizza, too. I've been thinking about getting over to Pizzeria Paradiso but haven't had time yet.

What's your favorite condiment?

Mustard. We make our own mustard here from Guinness beer. Eventually, I'll pick a local beer.

What's your favorite dessert?

Pretty simple, honestly. Ice cream, cookies. My favorite dessert that I make is probably bread pudding.

Favorite place to travel:

I don't know. I go to France frequently. The most interesting place I've ever been - for life and culinary purposes - is India. I lived in India for three years. I like China, too. I've never been to Japan, but I know I'm going to like that place.

Where did you grow up?

Chicago.

Fine dining or street food?

Street food, for sure. Fine dining is dead.