

The Occidental

Tourists and downtown regulars rub elbows over seasonal cocktails at this storied spot.

Sam Mitchell

Photos by Cynthia Sambro-Rier

Occidental Grill & Seafood may be more than 100 years old and in the heart of buttoned-down D.C., but thanks to Larry Von Wiegel, its cocktail menu is anything but stodgy. Today, modern, seasonal cocktails—think raspberry-rhubarb sangria and house-made blood orange soda—headline the restaurant’s once-staid repertoire. The bar is doing more than just keeping up with the times—it’s setting a standard.

Von Wiegel took over Occidental’s beverage program in 2008 when he joined the restaurant as assistant general manager. Thanks to his background as a chef (his formal education was bookended by stints in France working under gastronomical heavyweights Roger Vergé and George Pralus), he brought a culinary craftsman’s perspective to the job.

“My mind works in flavor profiles,” says Von Wiegel, explaining how he combines fresh ingredients—often straight from the restaurant’s patio garden—in exciting ways. But Occidental’s reach is about more than Von Wiegel’s thoughtful approach to mixology. For him, it’s the restaurant’s varied customer base, consisting of both locals and tourists of all ages, that allows it to set trends rather than just follow them.

Enter Jo-Jo Valenzuela, a veteran of D.C.’s restaurant and bar scene and adherent to the doctrine of seasonality. He came to Occidental in November after a stint at Ris and is in the process of assuming control of the beverage program so that Von Wiegel can focus on other responsibilities. Judging from Valenzuela’s spiked hair, tattooed forearms, and mischievous smile, Von Wiegel’s innovative bar program is in good hands. ♦

Sam Mitchell is a freelance food writer. He previously worked in politics—both in the U.S. Senate and at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—before leaving to attend culinary school, during which he worked as a line cook at Blue Duck Tavern in Washington, DC. Follow him @sammitchell.



Citrus In The Rye

Glassware: rocks glass

- 1½ oz Catocin Creek Watershed Gin
- 1½ oz Rittenhouse Rye
- ¾ oz fresh lemon juice
- ¾ oz fresh grapefruit juice
- ½ oz simple syrup
- ½ oz blood orange bitters
- 3 dashes Angostura bitters

Garnish: orange peel

Procedure:

Shake all ingredients, then strain and pour into a rocks glass with fresh ice. Release oil of orange peel by twisting it over the glass, then drop into the drink. Add a straw and serve.

Melon Colada

Glassware: highball

- 1½ oz 10 Cane Rum
- 1½ oz fresh melon juice
- 1½ oz coconut puree
- ½ oz simple syrup
- 3 dashes house-made cinnamon tincture

Garnish: dill

Procedure:

Swizzle ingredients with crushed ice. Garnish with dill and straw, and serve.

The Occidental Grill and Seafood

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