

plate



The Woman Who Stared at Goats

In a tiny strip mall in Glencoe, Margarita Challenger is attempting to import the flavors of her native Mexico one plate of goat tacos at a time. **By Peter Gianopulos**

Margarita Challenger pries open a menu for her new restaurant, Guanajuato in Glencoe, and starts flipping through the pages with purpose, flipping past the guacamole and the enchiladas and the *carne asada*, until she comes to an entry for barbacoa goat tacos. She taps it twice, gently rubs her fingers across the menu description (slowly cooked, pulled-apart goat meat garnished with onion and cilantro) and then says slowly, almost longingly, “I love this dish.”

It’s such a simple gesture, but the way she glides her fingers across the name — straight and smooth, back and forth, like the brush of a highlighter — it’s more like a caress. It’s the way you would test the softness of silk or rub a wish from the confines of a magic lamp. And it has that same effect — pure magic. Suddenly, in the width of her smile and timbre of her voice, Margarita Challenger is 9 years old again, a little girl sitting at a dinner table eating goat tacos.

And she is happy.

“We used to eat this every Sunday back home,” she says, eyes bending back time to a different year and a different place. “It was our brunch. We ate it all the time. Later, when I was pregnant and I went home, it’s the dish I requested. And every morning for the week I was home, my brother was there, with the barbacoa.”

She pauses for a moment, stealing a proud glance into her restaurant’s tiny kitchen. “When



A taste of Margarita Challenger's barbacoa goat tacos reveal her authentic approach to Mexican cooking.

we first moved here, I was afraid people wouldn't respond well to it, and a few people did say, 'Goat? You have goat on the menu?' But I kept it on. It's always felt like home to me."

The "move," as she calls it, was really more of a beginning. This past July, Challenger opened Gua-

najuato (pronounced *Juan-a-watt-o*) after spending two years operating a Mexican restaurant just a few doors away called Wholey Guacamole, a phrase that doesn't so much roll off her tongue as stick to the back of her throat like a rogue pinto bean.

It's nothing personal. Challenger says she's proud of Wholey Guacamole. It was, and will always be, her first restaurant. Her baby. She

purchased it in 2008 and transformed it, after a rough early going, into a profitable venture. But in spirit, especially in the early going, it felt like someone else's place.

Guanajuato, on the other hand, belongs entirely to Margarita Challenger. She named it after the state in central Mexico where she was born and has gone about re-creating, as best she can,

the spirit of her hometown of Dolores Hidalgo in the cozy 65-seat restaurant off Green Bay Road.

She's used Talavera tiles as inlaid centerpieces for her tables, lined the walls with photos of landmarks in Mexico, imported a 50-bottle tequila list and crafted a menu that blends popular Mexican favorites (chimichangas, fajitas, tilapia tacos) with more personal creations, items like her Michoacán grilled avocado and shrimp, inspired by the avocado orchards of the Uruapan, and *el molcajete*, a simmering spicy witch's brew of grilled cactus, onions, black beans, steak, salsa and cotija cheese served in a *molcajete*, the MesoAmerican version of a mortar and pestle.

There's nothing in Guanajuato's kitchen that Challenger's family wouldn't use back home. The homemade tortillas are fried in corn oil. The tacos are lined with real sour cream. The tomatillos are fresh. And the ice cream list includes favorites from Challenger's childhood, like avocado, molé, rum, cheese, tequila and avocado.

But tonight she's a little concerned about the volume of ice cream she's been selling — "I really thought more people would try the ice cream, that it would take off" — so she's trying to find a way to bring more attention to it on the menu.

"I used to walk to the plaza around the church of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, and there would be ice cream everywhere," she says. "It was in little stainless-steel buckets surrounded by ice and rock salt, mixed by hand with a wooden spoon.

There was every flavor, but my favorite combination was always avocado and cheese."

But as Challenger will tell you, there's been nothing easy about her journey to becoming a restaurateur. She was expected, as most young Mexican girls were at the time, to become a housewife. But she had other plans:

international business. She went to the University of Guanajuato and then, based on a recommendation from her sister, decided it might be better to study in the United States.

The only problem? Her English was spotty at best. Everyone talked so fast, even on the radio, that it was difficult for her to assimilate. And then her sister, who had been living in Chicago, had twins. Challenger became a de facto nanny to the duo, learning English by watching an endless loop of Disney's *The Jungle Book* and Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*.

For nearly four years, she waited tables at Lou Mitchell's, trying to piece together phrases she overheard during breakfast. Slowly but methodically, she found her way. "I remember an old customer of mine came back one day and said, 'Your English is much, much better. I remember when you used to bring us the



Margarita Challenger's right-hand man, chef Jovanny Diaz, runs the kitchen at Guanajuato in Glencoe.

wrong food.' And I said, 'You still ate it?' He just smiled at me and nodded yes."

She used the money she saved — "everyone I knew understood that if they asked me out for lunch, they had to pay" — to go to culinary school at the Washburne Culinary Institute in Chicago, which led to the launch of her successful catering business, Culinary Treasures, with Miguel Coronel, longtime chef at the Racquet Club, and Raul Arreola, who helped open Topolobampo with Rick Bayless.



Creatively plated fare include the aptly named *el molcajete*, which includes steak, grilled cactus, salsa, onions and black beans.



Stephanie Izard and her goat pizza with black kale, ricotta and caramelized onions.



Worth the Drive Girl & the Goat, Chicago

What's there left to say about Stephanie Izard, the winner of *Top Chef Season Four* and owner of the new Girl & the Goat restaurant in the West Loop, that you don't already know? For the last two years, her life has pretty much been an open Kindle, her ever step, vacation and knife cut documented via tweets, Video feeds, recipe cards and blog posts on her Web site, www.stephanieizard.com.

If you'd like to know what Izard ate on June 9, 2009 while in San Francisco (loquats, spreadable andouille, tongue tacos, and crabapple marmalade) or her favorite concert (U2, 1990) or her recollections of her old restaurant Scylla (hectic nights but proud memories), it's all just one or two clicks away. Everything, it seems except this little nugget.

Izard may have been born in Evanston, but her parents' first home was right here in Wilmette, and some of her family still reside in Winnetka. "Although I grew up on the East Coast, some

of my favorite childhood memories are when I would come back to Winnetka for Christmas," says Izard. "I remember the beautiful Christmas lights throughout the streets and cooking dinner with my whole family. Winnetka always felt like home to me."

And if that's not enough to inspire a trip downtown, just remember that she's committed to keeping at least one item on her ever-evolving menu (10 veggie, 10 meat, 10 fish items with influences from around the globe) through the shelf life of this

first issue of *Quintessential New Trier*. It's a doozie: a wood-fired-oven pizza topped with goat meat that's truly been put through the kitchen ringer.

First, the goat meat is marinated in a blend of beer and cherry juice, then braised in duck fat and chicken stock before being tossed in a sauce of red peppers with sour cherries and paired with a mix of black kale, ricotta and caramelized onions.

The world can call her Top Chef. We'll call her one of our own.

Girl & the Goat, 809 W. Randolph St., Chicago, 312/492-6262

Tasting Notes

Events, Deals, Developments and Specials from Local Restaurants

Wines on the Web

After developing not one but two successful area wine shops, Theresa Lucas, owner of **Good Grapes** in Glencoe and Winnetka, plans on launching a redesign of her Web site, www.goodgrapes.com, this October. The new feature? The ability to peruse her entire wine library from the comfort of your own wine cellar. In-store samplings will continue (eight wines on the weekdays, with bubbly on the weekends), but the relaunch will also highlight her wine program, which offers two bottles of wine (red, white or one of each) per month for \$45 plus shipping. "I see no reason to replicate what a big-box store carries. We offer bistro wines at reasonable prices. My niche is simple: high-quality at low cost." 685 Vernon Ave., Glencoe, 847/242-9800 and 809 Oak St., Winnetka, 847/446-8000



A Sound Investment

You can earn frequent-flyer points, hotel points, and discounts for buying loaves of bread from the same bakery so why not frequent diner points? At least that's Michael Lachowicz's philosophy. At his French restaurant, **Michael**, in Winnetka, he's launched a "premier guest dining" program aimed at rewarding his most valued customers. Guests can buy special pre-purchased dining accounts in blocks of \$500. Guests who enroll in the plan receive \$1.25 for every \$1 invested, therefore a \$500 account earns you \$625, \$1,000 becomes \$1,250 and so on. If you open a \$5,000 account, Lachowicz bumps the total up to \$6,500. And the best part? No blackout dates and no restrictions. **Restaurant Michael**, 64 Green Bay Road, Winnetka, 847/441-3100



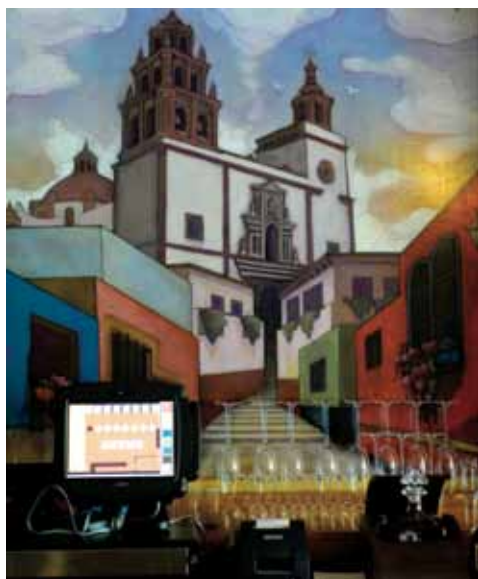
Just Like the Good Old Days

If you'd like some indication of where "the restaurant formerly known as Va Pensiero" is headed, let general manager Emlyn Thomas summarize, "We're not going to do appetinis here. If we're going to make a martini, it'll be with gin, maybe vodka. Not chocolate." Call it addition by subtraction. Ditto for the name of the restaurant, which is now simply **Pensiero Ristorante**. The restaurant's new owner Michael Pure, who manages the hotel in which the restaurant is housed, hasn't tinkered much with the menu — the truffled tagliatelle with mushrooms, caramelized cauliflower and tomato concasse will be tossed tableside in a hollowed out wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano — but according to Thomas there are plans to offer afternoon tea during the holidays, weekend brunch, etiquette classes and perhaps even huge family-style Italian Sunday dinners. **Pensiero Ristorante**, 1566 Oak Ave., Evanston, 847/475-7779



PHOTO: BILLY ROOD

She took some time off to raise her four children and then quietly pursued the idea of opening a Mexican restaurant in the northern suburbs. In 2008, she acquired Wholey Guacamole, but less than two years later she moved a few doors down to the old Boston Blackie's space to open Guanajuato with one overarching goal in mind.



One of the many decorations that Margarita Challenger uses to remind her (and her guests) of her native Mexico.

"I want my customers to taste the love we put in the food," says Challenger, whose chef, Jovanny Diaz, has brought a bit of his native Guerrero to the menu as well.

She looks at a baby at a nearby table and confesses that tonight she's only prepared chocolate ice cream, which seems to bother her. Never mind that it's a Wednesday night and the place is near capacity with order after order of burritos and enchiladas flying from the kitchen and empty margarita glasses at every table.

She says, "Next week I'm going to create another batch of ice cream. The avocado. And the cheese. And the rum."

"I'm going to let people try it, sample it for free," she says. "They'll like it won't they?"

But somehow, by the look in her eyes and the timbre of her voice, it doesn't sound at all like a question, but rather the answer she's been looking for all along.

Guanajuato, 73 Green Bay Road, Glencoe, 847/242-0501. Visit myguanajuato.com.

Recipe Book

Jerry's Restaurant's Fried Chicken

You don't learn how to fry chicken in the Navy. With 21 years of service under his apron, chef Jonnie Wills of Jerry's in Winnetka, can assure you of that much. Man a nuclear submarine? Double park an aircraft carrier anywhere in the world? Cook for 27,000 recruits in a single day? Yeah, your government can teach you all that. But fry a chicken? No, sir. That's mother's work.

The recipe for Jonnie's fried chicken, which is now something of a marquee attraction at Jerry's, was handed to him one Sunday afternoon in Indianapolis when he was 9 years old. He was given a one-time lesson on how to make it right. And off he went.

And Jonnie *did* make it right. He fried. They ate. Even mother smiled. And suddenly, Jonnie had a trump card over his brothers and sisters. If he didn't want to clean the bathroom or take out the garbage, he simply traded them a day of chores for a night of fried chicken. And a chef, as they say, was born.

So years later when Jonnie joined Jerry's and wanted to make a special "family meal" for his kitchen crew, he knew exactly what to make. The old reliable. Momma's fried chicken. Same basic seasonings. Same thin coat of flour. Same smiles.

Word traveled fast — traveled all the way to the front of the house where it became clear, one bite in, that Jonnie's chicken deserved a spot front and center on the everyday menu of the restaurant.

You can find it there now, paired with warm potato salad, steamed green beans and a Roquefort dipping sauce, with the elegant option of pairing the entire meal with a flute of champagne.

Which leaves only one question: What else exactly did Mrs. Wills teach her son?

"Well," says Wills, "I can't tell you that. I'll have to let it sneak up on you."

Jerry's (at Corner Cooks), 505 Chestnut St., Winnetka, 847/441-0134



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|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 whole fryer chicken 4 cups of flour 1 Tablespoon Old Bay seasoning 1 Tablespoon seasoning salt 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper 1 teaspoon garlic powder 1 teaspoon black pepper ¼ teaspoon crushed red pepper vegetable oil | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) First, quarter one whole chicken 2) Sprinkle seasoning ingredients generously onto each piece of chicken, reserving a pinch of seasoning 3) Let sit at least 15 minutes to soak into the thickest part of the chicken. 4) Mix flour and remaining pinch of seasoning in a bowl. 5) Dredge chicken in mixture to cover completely. 6) Shake off excess flour and deep fry at 350 degrees for 15 minutes in a skillet, putting enough oil to cover the chicken. 7) Place in 275-degree oven for 10 minutes to seal in the juices. 8) May serve chicken either hot or cold. |
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Two relatively unknown wines in the United States — Arneis from Piedmont in Italy and Viura from Spain — are wonderful alternatives to Sauvignon Blanc, as are Albariño (Spain), Verdelho (Portugal), dry Riesling (Eden and Clare Valley, Australia) and Torrentes (Argentina). In general, these wines are very good without food (and are excellent thirst quenchers in hot weather) but still have enough acidity to match up well with foods that pair well with Sauvignon Blanc.

For those who prefer off-dry or slightly sweeter wines, great choices can be found in

Grüner Veltliner (Austria), Sémillon (Hunter Valley, Australia and Bordeaux) and Riesling in the Kabinett and Spätlese levels (Germany, Austria and Alsace, France). These wines age extremely well, have great acidity and therefore are excellent food wines. Great matches include light meat salads, such as tuna and chicken, veal and poultry dishes, Asian, Southwestern/Mexican and Indian fare. In general, the more acidic the food the higher acidity the wine should have. Conversely, the sweeter the food, the sweeter the wine should be.

I saved the ubiquitous Chardonnay grape for the last main-course wine. It is the most popular wine in the United States and ranges from almost sweet to bone-dry and from unoaked to extremely oaky. Although I drink and love the wines mentioned heretofore, I drink more Chardonnay than any serious food wine. While there are great examples of Chardonnay producers in the United States, such as Aubert, Peter Michael, Kistler, Stony Hill, Ridge (Monte Bello) as well as others and one of the world's greatest from Australia (Leeuwin Art Series), most of the greatest Chardonnays come from France.

As I noted in the *Quintessential Barrington* July/August 2010 issue featuring Chablis, this is one of my favorite wines. This unoaked Chardonnay perhaps best expresses the essence of the grape.

Pair Shaped

If you're looking for a primer on wine pairings, read on. If you're looking one of the world's finest wineries, visit Chateau Y'Quem (above).

FIRST, AN INTRODUCTION. Let's clink glasses and get to know each other. While I've spent much of my professional career in management-consulting, for the past 40 years, wine has been my true passion, inspiring me to travel the world in search of the world's finest producers, judge international wine competitions and offer advice, when solicited, to any client who might value it. Closer to home, I design wine cellars, work as a wine specialist at the Lake Zurich Costco and have written a wine column, *Down Cellar*, for our sister publication, *Quintessential Barrington* (www.qbar-rington.com), for the last four and a half years.

I thought we'd begin our discussion with a favorite topic — wine and food pairings — and felt a recap of some previous suggestions and the addition of others would be a valuable debut topic.

So where to begin? With bubbly, of course. Champagne and sparkling wines are often thought of as celebratory wines. In fact, their bracing acidity is very food friendly. Think blinis with smoked

salmon or caviar with garni, oysters as well as Dover sole and brill.

But to be honest, I usually prefer to start with non-sparkling wine. Sauvignon Blanc or Sauvignon Blanc blended with Semillon (a la Bordeaux) make for a great opener, with or without food. Favorites include Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé from the Loire Valley as well as similarly styled wines from the United States, Chile, New Zealand as well as other parts of France. These wines pair wonderfully with many white cheeses, especially chèvre, light- to medium-bodied white fish (especially halibut), most crustaceans (except lobster), bruschetta as well as simple chips and salsa.

Also remember the allure of the Chenin Blanc grape, which finds its ultimate expression in the appellation of Savennières. Although made in dry, off-dry and sweet styles, one of my favorites is the dry offering by Baumard. The regular bottling and especially the more expensive label Papillon are worth the treasure hunt to find them.




Great accompaniments include simple white fish, oysters, crab, shrimp and mild white soft cheeses like Brie, Camembert and Saint-André.

Although I may sound fickle, my all-time favorite Chardonnay appellation is Corton-

Charlemagne (\$100-\$200 per bottle), which is generally thought to be the best wine with salmon and lobster. It is rich and munificent. Think melted butter. This wine was “invented” when the emperor Charlemagne challenged his winemaker to make him a white wine that he would love as much as the only wine he drank, Le Corton, a Grand Cru Burgundy. This was Charlemagne’s way of meeting his wife’s demand to stop spilling red wine in his white beard. The winemaker’s re-sounding success is forevermore immortalized by the addition of the emperor’s name to his former favorite. This wine is so rich and intense that at the end of a recent New Year’s Eve dinner, I finished my last glass of 1989 Bonneau du Martray Corton Charlemagne (ironically from the vineyard which Charlemagne owned) after I had my last glass of 1983 Chateau Margaux (one’s of the world’s greatest red wines).

The other twin titan of Chardonnay is the even more expensive Le Montrachet. It is generally more linear in nature with seemingly greater acidity and can be served with great seafood dishes with rich sauces. Less expensive sub-appellations, such as Bâtard-Montrachet, Bienvenues Bâtard-Montrachet and even the single vineyard wines from Puligny-Montrachet and Chassagne-Montrachet, are fab-

ulous (but not inexpensive) alternatives. Lucky for most of us, even the village wines from these appellations can be very good.

Finally, I saved the best for last. Chateau d’Yquem (\$200-\$400 for a half bottle) is arguably the greatest wine in the world. As a dinner opener, paired with foie gras, it is without peer. By itself or paired with a ripe pear or a blue cheese, it’s the perfect closer for a meal. Given the high cost, thankfully there are alternatives — Premier Cru Sauternes such as Climens and Rieussec as well as great dessert wines from the Riesling grape, like Beerenause, Trockenbeerenause and Eiswein. Alternatives, yes, but do not allow yourself to exit this world without experiencing the ultimate olfactory and taste phenomenon, Chateau d’Yquem. A santé. 



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The Locavore / Openings

Grape Expectations By Peter Gianopoulos

Maybe Emily Link was too young to know any better. Maybe she was too innocent in the ways of township politics. Or maybe she was just too committed to the idea of owning her own wine shop to care. But a little over a year ago, at just 25 years of age, Link wrote a letter to the town council of Winnetka asking them to create a new liquor license, one that would allow her to open up the first pure wine shop in Winnetka.

What can she say? It was her *Footloose* moment. There was nothing as dramatic as Kevin Bacon staring down John Lithgow in a shadowy courtroom. There were no dramatic Bible readings. And there were no villains on either side of the debate. (In fact, Link says the town council of

Winnetka was so excited about the idea that their main hurdle was working out the legal language of what constituted a “wine tasting.”) But the results were equally satisfying. At the close of 2009, Link was given the legal right to open up her dream, a cozy little wine shop on Elm Street.

After a half year spent building out the shop — “it was my family who was there at 2 A.M. building wine racks — the Winnetka Wine Shop officially opened March 12. Link, who spent her college years sipping Chardonnays in the Finger Lake region and later studied the flavors of South Africa’s wine country, handles the wine, while her hus-



band, Steve, who works for the Goose Island Beer Company, will handle the craft brews.

Three wines are always available for samplings at the tasting counter, which can be paired with a wine bar offerings, such as pasta salads, sandwiches, wraps and other light fare. And in an effort to give back a little of the love she’s received from the community, Link has already given \$3,000 in products and donations to local charities, like the Noble Street Charter School and the Lymphoma & Leukemia Society.

Winnetka Wine Shop,
726 Elm St., Winnetka, 847/446-2716