

Empire Builders

BY NEVIN MARTELL

Three local restaurant stars expand their footprint without lowering the bar.

This page, clockwise from right: Chef Mike Isabella at his new spot, Kapnos; fried rice with blue crab at Kapnos; a baby goat-with-harissa sandwich from G, the chef's new sandwich shop.

Opposite page, clockwise from top right: inside D.C.'s Doi Moi; fatty pork collar skewers from Doi Moi; the restaurant's owners, chefs Mark Kuller and Haidar Karoum; spice-roasted half chicken at Doi Moi.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT SUCHMAN

Plenty of boutique restaurant concepts created by national chains are plunking down multiple locations in D.C., Virginia and Maryland. But a cadre of local chefs and restaurateurs are driving the region's most impressive culinary expansions.

A trio of hometown heroes are behind these new empire-building concepts, which are anything but cookie-cutter.

KAPNOS + G

Mike Isabella is on a roll. His star-making turn on *Top Chef* and the out-of-the-box success of Graffiato, his Italian-American hot spot in Chinatown, have cemented him as one of the most successful new chef-restaurateurs around. Now he's landed on the booming 14th Street corridor with a two-fer concept.

In one corner, there's Kapnos. At this refined and modernized Grecian eatery, the chef builds on the skills he honed at José Andrés' Zaytinya. Make sure to bring a few friends. That way you can order some of the feast-sized dishes, such as the succulent, wood-fired lamb shoulder and the salt-

baked dorado in a clever fish-shaped pastry crust. Fill out the tabletop with mezze plates, such as charred Brussels sprouts emphasized with black garlic, taramasalata briny with carp roe and caviar, and crackly phyllo pies packed with roasted duck.

On the other side, there's G — a sandwich shop by day and a tasting-menu concept when night falls — which celebrates Isabella's New Jersey upbringing and Italian roots. The five-star sandwiches prove that the chef is on a figurative and literal roll. Can't-lose choices include Thai-basil-accented chicken parm, baby goat amped with harissa and a deeply satisfying roasted cauliflower sandwich. Better get an extra to go — they're that good.

Kapnos, 2201 14th St., NW; 202/234-5000; kapnosdc.com
G, 2201 14th St., NW; 202/234-5015; gsandwich.com

MALMAISON

Tucked under the Whitehurst Freeway on the western edge of the Georgetown waterfront, you'll find Malmaison. The bistro-bakery-bar is the third effort from the Popal family, who own Café Bonaparte nearby and Adams Morgan's French-accented boîte Napoleon.



The duplex space is fronted by floor-to-ceiling garage doors, which are cranked open wide during warmer months. The color scheme is simply divided between black and white elements, with the dining room's low-slung pastel plum chairs providing welcome flashes of vibrancy.

Consulting chef Gerard Pangaud, who enjoyed a long run at downtown favorite Gerard's Place, designed the menu, which is executed by executive chef Yomi Faniyi. The cuisine leans toward continental classics during the day and French fare in the evening. Lunchtime options are hit or miss, though the Gallic standards — such as buttery, cheesy quiches and duck confit salad — are always a good bet.

The real stars are the desserts, elegantly turned out by pastry chef Serge Torres, an alum of New York City's Le Cirque and cousin to famed chocolatier Jacques Torres. His eggshell-tender macarons arrive in bold flavors, like poppy raspberry and fudgy chocolate, while one memorable tartlet brims with lemon curd and features a crenellation of meringue. A *très délicieux* finale.

Malmaison, 3401 K St., NW; 202/817-3340;
malmaisondc.com



DOI MOI

Restaurateur Mark Kuller and chef Haidar Karoum don't like to repeat themselves. In 2007, they rolled out the New American wine bar Proof and followed it up three years later with Estadio, a standard-setting tapas restaurant on 14th Street. Now they've opened Doi Moi just a few blocks north of the latter, an ambitious love letter to Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. Unlike their other eateries, which rely heavily on dusky tones, this corner space emphasizes whiteness and brightness.

Keep an eye out for dishes marked *phet* (spicy) and *phet mak* (very spicy) — Karoum isn't messing around. The chili-spiked *laab ped* (ground duck and duck liver salad) falls into the latter category, but still manages to sing with beguiling notes of herbs, citrus and a hint of acid. Hotter still is the halibut in the fiery Jungle Curry, which will have you madly gesturing your server for another round of cooling cocktails (the one made with tamarind soda



and peanut-infused bourbon does the trick nicely).

There are plenty of dishes that aren't firestarters, such as fried rice shot through with blue crab, gloriously fatty pork collar skewers and the spice-roasted half chicken. Please your palate at the end of the meal with a cup of swirled soft serve, available in ever-changing flavors like banana, coffee and mango.

Doi Moi, 1800 14th St., NW; 202/733-5131;
doimoidc.com

SWEET SPOT

Cuckoo for Co Co. Pops



A cup of hot chocolate no longer has to be a sad little packet of cocoa powder and mini marshmallows mixed with microwave-warmed water. Say hello to Co Co. Sala Chocolate Boutique's Co Co. Pops. Swirl one of these melty dark chocolate lollipops in a mug of steaming milk, sip, and savor. There are five flavors: straight-up 64% dark chocolate, salted caramel, Reese's-style peanut butter, spicy chipotle and aromatic gingerbread. All go well with one of the certifiably addictive house-made vanilla bean marshmallows. Co Co. Sala, 929 F St., NW; 202-393-0845; cocosala.com — N.M.