

The life-span of even the most imposing houses once located in the city has at times been remarkably short, perhaps best illustrated by the Harry Wardman mansion that stood at Connecticut Avenue and Woodley Road, which stood for only 19 years after it was constructed in 1909. It was razed for his own Wardman Park Hotel in 1928. But many more modest houses have also come and gone in the city, especially adjacent to evolving commercial areas, such as Columbia Road in Adams Morgan.

This 1921 image of the house that once stood at 1825 Columbia Road was taken for a real estate advertisement by the Randall Hagner firm. Built between 1907 and 1908, the house was later owned by well-known hotelier Orrin G. Staples, but was eventually torn down in 1931, only 23 years after it was built for railroad contractor Hollis J. Rinehart and his family. According to the 1910 census, Hollis and Lena Reinhart lived there along with their four young sons and a live-in servant named Daisy Bayne. About the time it was built, the square in which the lot was situated was known alternatively as the Mintwood and Widows Mite subdivision, and for a brief time, Little's subdivision, named after the Little family mansion that was located close by.

By 1913, Orrin G. Staples had purchased the property, having moved there from a residence at the Riggs House hotel with his wife Cecelia. According to *The City of Washington*, Staples had been born in 1851 in Watertown, New York, the son of Nathan and Amanda Curtis Staples. He spent time in the patent medical business, as a manufacturer of cigars, general merchandise, and claimed to be the originator of the prize package candy business.

Successful at an early age, Staples capitalized on the celebrity and wealthy visitors to the Alexandria Bay area of the Thousand Islands, and in 1872 set out constructing a large hotel at the cost of \$100,000. The result was the Thousand Island House, an immediately successful venture that earned him the nickname as the "Napoleon of finance." In fact, just a year later, he sold the hotel and moved to Washington, DC, where he purchased the old Willard Hotel, a smaller predecessor to the Willard now located at 14th and Pennsylvania Avenue.

Staples later refurbished Willard's, in 1883, in an effort to attract new tourists coming to Washington on popular Pullman train cars. He earned an estimated \$500,000 in profit from the hotel during his first 18 years in business. In October 1891, he purchased the failed Riggs House hotel, located at 15th and G Streets, at an auction, and had it refurbished as well. He and his wife were listed as residents there in the 1896 *Elite List*. In 1895, Staples sold the Willard, only to buy it back two years later, in 1897, when the purchaser, Mr. M.D. Lewis lost the property under foreclosure. Staples eventually sold the property again, in 1899, to a syndicate which subsequently built the grand hotel with the same name that continues to operate to this day.

In 1896, Staples purchased the lease and furniture of the National Hotel at 6th and Pennsylvania Avenue

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# Scenes from the Past...



Source: Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr., Memorial Library

This elegant house was built between 1907 and 1908 and once stood at 1825 Columbia Road. It was home to hotelier Col. Orrin G. Staples for many years before it was razed in 1931.

Col Orrin G. Staples, at left, lived at 1825 Columbia Road for many years before his death in 1918. He had made a name for himself by constructing the Thousand Islands House hotel in New York State, and was also an owner of the Willard Hotel for a short period.



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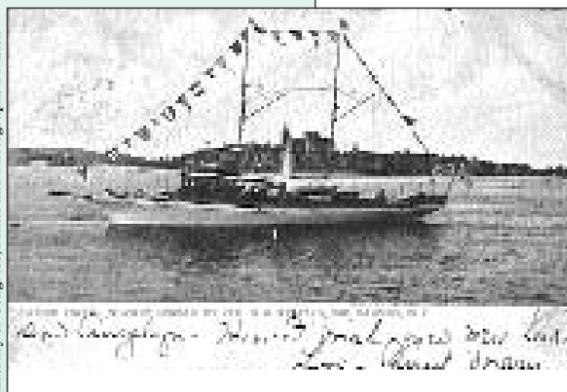


Source: Kelsey & Associates, Inc. Private Collection.

O. G. Staples purchased the Willard Hotel in 1873, sold it in 1895, but repurchased it under a default in 1897. Seen above is his calling card, used sometime before he finally sold the hotel in 1899. Staples also owned the National and Riggs Hotels in Washington.

When Staples was not at home at 1825 Columbia Road or in residence at one of his many hotels, he enjoyed sailing the yacht coined Neried in the Thousand Islands region of New York State.

O. G. Staples made his mark on the American hotel business by building the Thousand Island House hotel, below, in 1872, located on Alexandria Bay in New York. It was known to be the "best advertised hotel in the United States."



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## RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley\*

### CURRY CLUB India East

It's hard to ignore a fellow foodie when that person raves about a new restaurant find, a relatively new Georgetown Indian restaurant—the Curry Club on upper Wisconsin. Why not, since good Indian food is a private passion, and hey, why not track down another source of Indian eats.

Snuggled into the downstairs main entry room, Curry Club's kitchen crew stand behind an open counter, and at first glance, unsuspecting patrons might think they've dropped into the wrong address. Far from convincing folks that this place serves up Indian-style fare, the staff looks like easy-going college kids flipping burgers or maybe tossing pizzas for the walk-in trade.

Nope, as it turns out, that is THE kitchen for the restaurant upstairs, a diminutive space about the size of several closets pressed together. Right next door to Bistrot Lepic, the Curry Club may suffer from being overwhelmed by its very fancy and well-known neighbor.

Upstairs, the décor suggests a chic Georgetown parlor with loads of flashy silk-covered pillows on the banquette benches and dark woods highlighted by the colorful splashes of fresh flowers at each table and elegant tulip prints hanging on the back wall. But not much else gives away that this is an Indian-themed restaurant, not even the aromas that might seep upstairs to intrigue the palate.

Even the menu suggests that Curry Club

is about contemporizing the great Subcontinent's illustrious cuisine with dishes that might fit better on a nouvelle cuisine roster. It turns out that the menu changes daily, but it did offer these starter dishes recently: chicken tikka, chili shrimp and an Indian gazpacho, which must be very much like the classic Anglo-Indian mulligatawny, but cold.

Highly-spiced food always holds a special allure for me, so chili shrimp were the obvious order. Not at all spicy, the five shrimp were glazed with turmeric and speckled with black mustard seeds, but nary a chili was in sight. On the side, a dollop of a cold tomato-onion relish salad. Okay, but maybe for \$8 there could be a bit more dazzle, a flash of fire, a surfeit of heat and seasonings to showcase the shrimp.

Entrée selections are just as limited, and include a vegetable *thali*; a "tandoori" salmon that the menu describes as grilled; a chicken breast in tomato sauce; the beef vindaloo with the promise of real heat; and what was truly an outstanding apricot lamb dish—a leg of lamb stewed with spices and apricots. Two vegetable choices—such as grilled tomato, kidney bean curry, and cauliflower stew—are sides to the main course.

No Indian meal—well, at least a North-Indian meal—is complete without a wheel of naan or roti (breads). Baked in the tandoor, these large, flat breads are generally

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## SCENES

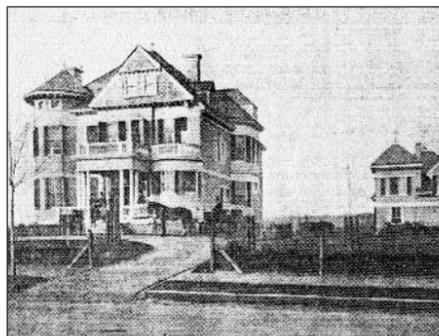
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amidst all of his other hotel business dealings. Staples also repurchased his beloved Thousand Island House in 1897, and spent \$50,000 refurbishing it to its former, lavish decor. In addition to his local hotels, he set about constructing 58 dwellings in Watertown, New York, along with a large commercial block. He also served as the Director of the Columbia National Bank in Washington, and had been a member of the Washington Stock Exchange since 1886.

On Columbia Road, Staples' immediate neighbor to the west, on the corner of Mintwood Place (at 1847 Columbia Road), was Brigadier General George L. Andrews and his family, who had his large main house and rear carriage house built in 1893 when the area was vast open fields. The "Woodley" apartment building on the other corner of Mintwood Place, at 1851 Columbia Road, was built in 1903 to the designs of Thomas Franklin Schneider.

Orrin Staples did not enjoy his tenure on Columbia Road for long, however, as he died in 1918, after living there just five years. The 1920 census shows his widow Cecelia, then 35, as the head of the household, along with their daughter, also named Cecelia. They rented rooms in the house to four lodgers that year, which included physician John Lowery and newspaper journalist George H. Peet.

Cecelia was apparently Staples' second or third wife, and 34 years his junior, if one believes his own highly animated biographical entry in *The City of Washington*, which gave his birth date as October 14, 1851. However, when Orrin Staples was enumerated in the 1880 census at the Thousand Islands House hotel that summer, he listed



Washingtoniana Division, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library.

Staples neighbor to the west was Brig. General George L. Andrews, who had built this impressive house at the northeast corner of Columbia Road and Mintwood Place in 1893 (1847 Columbia Road).

his birth year as 1835. He was then married to a wife named Nellie, and together they had a daughter, also by the same name. They were listed along with 24 live-in servants that apparently ran the hotel. To further add mystery, the *Investor's Hand-Book*, published in 1900, listed his birth year as 1848. The altered dates may explain why Staples claimed to have built the Thousand Island House when he was just 21, but may have actually been several years older.

In any event, in 1920, Cecelia indicated that she carried a mortgage on 1825 Columbia Road, and it was offered for sale just a year later, in 1921. Ten years later, the house and others along the block were torn down to make way for the commercial and apartment buildings that line the 1800 block of Columbia Road today, and no physical remnants remain today that offer clues to the once fashionable, semi-rural residential nature of the road.

—Paul Kelsey Williams  
Historic Preservation Specialist  
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# Food in the 'Hood

By Joel Denker

## THE PRIDE OF THE GARDEN

Editor's Note: The writer, a former Peace Corp volunteer in Africa many years ago, is the author of *Capital Flavors: Exploring Washington's Ethnic Restaurants* (1988, Seven Locks Press), which evolved from his series in this newspaper over a decade ago, known then as "The Ethnic Bazaar." In addition, his *The World on a Plate: A Tour Through the History of America's Ethnic Cuisines* was published in June 2003 by Westview Press (www.westviewpress.com), in which part of one chapter was drawn from articles that originally had appeared in this space.

Queries, comments, suggestions can be sent to [denker@starpower.net](mailto:denker@starpower.net).

We have fallen in love with the latest mango fashions—smoothies, salsas, sorbets. We scorn the sour green mango that South Asians love. And, just like tomatoes, we want mangoes that are tasty and ripe all the time.

In the mango's heartland, on the Indian Subcontinent, the fruit is a seasonal pleasure. Planting the tree, picking the fruit, reveling in its honeyed flavor, and preserving its riches are all part of the rhythms of the culture. You can transplant the mango but not the social fabric into which it is woven.

A recent visit to the Burma Restaurant, the city's only eatery featuring that country's cuisine, stimulated these thoughts. The hilly region between Northeast India and Burma is widely considered to be the birthplace of the mango.

One afternoon I enjoyed a classic Burmese dish, mango pork, while Jane Tinpe and her son, John, who run the business, explained their people's affection for the sour mango. Pieces of mango pickle imbued the gravy suffusing the tender chunks of pork with its sharp flavor. The mango, John remarked, had been marinated in a mixture of oil, chili pepper, and garlic. The mango's role, he said, was "to cut the fattiness of the pork, which was a little too rich."

The sourness of the unripe mango is what endears the fruit to the Burmese. "Burmese want sour and spicy," Jane commented. "Everything is sour in Burma." The climate is also conducive to this pleasure. "When it's hot, we just want to eat sour things."

Although the Burmese eat the sweet mango, they prefer the tart one. They dip slices of green mango in fish sauce. A stick of "barely ripe mango," seasoned with salt and hot pepper, John said, is a popular street market treat.

The Burma encourages customers with a liking for sweet mangos and fruity chutney to explore strange tastes. "Westerners have a sweet tooth," John observed.

I was eager to learn more of the story behind the golden fruit. The mango, I discovered, is a lofty evergreen (growing 50 to 60 feet) whose long stems offer up clusters of opulent fruit. A source of pleasure as well as an object of devotion, it was mentioned in Indian writings as early as 2000 B.C. His followers presented the Buddha with a mango grove, the lush foliage of which provided a canopy under which he could meditate and rest. Mango trees became a fixture of the gardens of Buddhist temples.

To the Hindus, the tree symbolized fertility and plenty, love and fulfillment. Its pinkish blossoms, which fall off as the fruit emerges, represented the arrows of the Indian Cupid. Families, desiring a son, adorned their doorways with its leaves.

The "pride of the garden," as poet Amir Khusrau calls it, is honored in religious rites. Early spring flowers were offered to Sarasvati, God of Wisdom. On Hindu holy days, believers brushed their teeth with its twigs.

The fruit was the stuff of myth and fable. In one legend, recounted by food writer

Jane Grigson, the daughter of the sun "jumped into a lake and became a golden lotus" in order to "escape from a wicked sorceress who was after her. The king of the land fell in love with the golden lotus. The sorceress burnt it to ashes. From the ashes grew a tree, the tree flowered and the king fell in love with this second flower. The flower became a fruit, a glorious mango, and the king fell in love with the mango. When the mango was ripe, it fell to the ground and split. Out stepped the daughter of the sun in her beauty, and the king recognized her as his wife whom he had lost long ago."

The tree, which exerted such power over the imagination, was a strong and hardy one. Now domesticated, it grew wild in the high forests, rooting deeply in hillsides, ravines, and streams. The mango, which can live up to a 100 years, thrives in the unforgiving terrain. But it will only flourish in areas with a definite, short dry season followed by a long rainy period. The monsoon months in India, Pakistan, and Burma—from April to the middle or end of June—are the peak time for ripening. The voluptuous "apples of the tropics" are then ready to be plucked.

The fruits are tremendously varied in their size, shape, and color. They can be yellow, pink, red, or purple. They can be tiny or plump, round, oval, long, or narrow. So irresistible was its shape that the mango became a common motif on saris and shawls. Europeans borrowed the pattern in their paisley designs.

The Indians were so keen on the fruit that they domesticated more than a 1,000 kinds from seedlings. One of the most ancient of cultivated fruits was made more desirable and delicious through the patient, devoted efforts of unsung farmers. The unpleasant qualities—too much fiber, a turpentine taste—of the fruit whose relatives include poison ivy and poison oak were replaced with more attractive characteristics. Cultivators selected for fruit with the sweetest, juiciest flavor and concentrated on growing these types.

So essential was the mango to the Indian diet that its oldest name, amra, the botanist Martson Bates points out, was also the Sanskrit word for provisions or victuals. The Hindu shortened it to "am." The fruit also acquired different names in the country's regional languages; the Tamils in the south called it mankay.

The mango moved further east, most likely with Buddhist monks who brought

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### Mango Sources

- Burma Restaurant, 740 6th Street, NW—tel., 638-1280;
- Jolt 'N Bolt, 1918 18th Street, NW—tel., 232-0077;
- Whole Foods Market, 1440 P Street, NW—tel., 332-4300.

## FOOD

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their religion and tastes with them during the fourth or fifth centuries B.C. Transplanted to what is now Malaysia and Indonesia, the fruit acquired a new name, mangas.

Enamored of the luscious fruit they found growing in Goa, the capital of their trading empire, the Portuguese in the 16th century carried it to their other Indian outposts. They also grafted new, delectable varieties of mangoes and gave them Portuguese names—Carreira, Parreira, Fernandin. As I talked with Manuel Periera, the Goan counterman at the Adams-Morgan café Jolt 'N Bolt, he spoke lyrically about the Alphonso, his favorite variety. Named for a Governor-General, the Alphonso changes from yellowish green to vivid yellow to scarlet.

The Portuguese, the tireless disseminators of the pineapple, the cashew, and other plants, found new homes for the mango. They took its seeds, historian A.J.R. Russell-Wood notes, to their stations along the East African coast, which guarded the route to India. By the beginning of the 18th century, the mariners had introduced the plant in their Brazilian colony.

The mango circulated through the Americas. From Rio de Janeiro it traveled to the Barbados in 1742. The British seized a cargo of mangoes from a French ship headed for Haiti and planted their bounty in Jamaica in 1782. India sent one of its prized varieties, the "mulgoba" ("makes the mouth water"), to the U.S. in 1889, where it ended up in the hands of a horticulturist in Lake Worth, Florida.

Back at Jolt 'N Bolt, I picked up more

mango lore from the South Asian staff, who grew up with tropical fruit. Farooq Munir, whose shop turns out one of the widest assortments of fruit smoothies (mango, guava, pineapple, banana), is nostalgic for the mangoes of his native Pakistan. He remembers picnics and parties where the fruit took center stage. "We all sit down and eat this together as a family, as a reunion. It's part of our culture."

A "hot" fruit, the mango, Farooq says, warms the body during cool weather. As we talked, a customer from Bombay added his observations: "The mango, it's an aphrodisiac."

The mango, Farooq laments, has fallen prey to the unrelenting desire for immediate gratification in his adopted land. Too impatient to wait for the fruit to naturally ripen, we too easily accept "force ripened" mangoes.

Counterman Pereira associates seasons of the year in Goa with mango rituals. During harvest time, workers pulled mangoes from the trees with a fascinating contraption, a "stick with a net." When small, green sour mangoes appeared on the trees, families turned their minds to making pickle, a tart relish that marries the acidity of the fruit with a pungent masala, a spice mix. "Every time the season starts, people prepared mango pickle," he recalls.

I went searching for mango chutney at Whole Foods and was jolted back to reality. A sales clerk took me to the shelves of Indian condiments. A cracker spread with Major Grey chutney, a sweet confection conjured up by the British in India, topped with cream cheese, and onion, she told me, was one of her fondest memories of growing up. I wondered how she would handle the mango pork at the Burma. □

## DINING

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tender and show off their grilling with dark blisters on the cooked exterior where the dough has been pressed against the oven walls. The Curry Club's version of naan comes as several thick, small and rather doughy circles branded with grill marks. Good, but odd.

Desserts are equally minimalist, and nothing from the selection of coconut ice cream, yogurt cake with white chocolate and pistachio ice cream, cardamom date ice cream, and a chocolate brownie foretell what is really the range of Indian sweets. The dessert list clearly shows that the kitchen crew is straddling two worlds, and sometimes the twain shall never meet. □

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*\*Alexandra Greeley is a food writer, editor and restaurant reviewer. She has authored books on Asian and Mexican cuisines published by Simon & Schuster, Doubleday, and Macmillan. Other credits include food editor of Vegetarian Times, restaurant reviews and food articles for national and regional publications, as well as former food editor/writer for the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong.*

**Alexandra Greeley's reviews archived at [www.intowner.com](http://www.intowner.com)**



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