

Seattle has bequeathed the world more than its fair share of modern icons: Boeing; Microsoft; Starbucks; Amazon and Costco are the most obvious. But as in so many other regions, money and expertise in one field have led inevitably and probably less profitably to the fields of food and wine.

The wine club at Boeing was one of the first to lead the way when several of its leading members decided to put pastime into practice - Cadence, Nota Bene, Austin Robaire and Willis Hall wineries were all founded by ex- Boeing employees. But in two other instances the professional and scientific training which two individuals received courtesy of Boeing has now produced more highly distinctive, inexpensive food and drink outlets.

The first, and probably the place I would like to start every day, is Café Vivace up on Capitol Hill, which is in my opinion the finest coffee bar in the US and owes its unique character and the quality of its coffee blend to the obvious maniacal determination of its founder, David Schomer.

Schomer trained originally in Boeing's quality control department but then decided to apply the same professionalism, combined with obvious innate but until then latent, passion to coffee. Trips to Italy led him to appreciate that the best blends incorporate a percentage of the less expensive and often overlooked robusto beans; his technical background allowed him to strip the renowned La Marzocco coffee machines and crank them up even further to meet his demanding specifications; and his experience in quality control has led him to imbue his baristas (and those whom he has trained are known locally as Schomerites) with the same commitment so that they roast, grind and tamp your coffee to his specific instructions (and anyone wanting to follow suit should get a copy of Schomer's book, Perfect Espresso, from espressoivivace.com - and I do hope many restaurateurs will avail themselves of his accumulated coffee wisdom).

Having spent more on his book than several, excellent coffees I headed down the hill for another gastronomic experience courtesy of Boeing. But this time the consequences of Armandino Batali's travels for the company, particularly sojourns in Spain and Italy, have had enormous implications on restaurants as far afield as New York.

Armandino is the father of Mario Batali, currently New York's most exciting chef at Babbo and Otto Enoteca Pizzeria, and it was during their European tours that father, son (and daughter Gina who now works with her father when not holding down a 'virtual job'in the locomotive division of GE) developed their passion for the pig and all its products. As a result, when Armandino retired five years ago he underwent a short course at the Culinary institute of America and then opened Salumi, to sell his own home cured salami and prosciutto.

With a genial grin that belies his age, Armandino recalls their first day's trading. "We sold two sandwiches and thought we had done pretty well." Today, over 200 customers a day pile into their tall, narrow slice of a shop for sandwiches, his lamb prosciutto (of which he claims to be the only producer in the world) and any form of charcuterie from the pork which he processes in the scrupulously clean plant he has built at the back of the shop.

And on Friday nights the communal table in the shop becomes a restaurant serving a seven course Italian dinner for a maximum of 14 when Armandino is joined by his still sprightly 68 year old sister Isolina, known as Aunt Izzy, who takes centre stage and rolls what are considered to be the city's best gnocchi. (Sadly, these dinners are booked a year in advance!) Currently, Armandino is also digesting USDA legislation to enable him to sell wholesale but he has reservations about dealing with chefs, "They're all cranks," he explained.

The city's most striking contribution to food is Pike Place Market where growers, producers and food retailers stand next door to some excellent eating places most notably The Crumpet Shop, where the crumpets are almost as good as my mother-in-law's; the Market Grill which serves toasted halibut sandwiches next to fishmongers displaying whole 35lb specimens recently caught off the coast of nearby Alaska; and the authentically French bistro, Le Pichet.

The revival of Seattle's downtown coupled with the proximity of the city's baseball and football stadia as well as the brand new Symphony Hall have all been good news for the city's restaurateurs most notably Tom Douglas, Seattle's most successful chef/ restaurateur, and the hugely popular Wild Ginger which six months ago opened a jazz bar, The Triple Door, underneath.

Douglas runs three restaurants, Palace Kitchen, Etta's Seafood in the market and The Dahlia Lounge which he also designed to great success so that it exudes an air of a bygone era. Its red leather banquettes and booths recall the film LA Confidential although the lampshades in the shape of multi-coloured fish relate immediately to the waterfront nearby.

So too does the menu which boasts a host of seafood dishes, most impressively a really well cooked piece of wood roasted wild salmon, crisp salmon skin with escarole and salted potatoes. Cleverly, the first courses also include a seafood sampler, a combination of the six first courses each served in a small bowl sitting on a bed of ice within a larger, round bowl. This presentation was only spoiled by too much ice underneath which numbed the flavour of the more delicate items. And my only disappointment came with the dessert menu which promised the world's finest crème caramel but failed to deliver.

A crowded Dahlia Lounge with a busy bar close to midnight should have prepared me for dinner at Wild Ginger but as I walked into this hugely popular restaurant at 1930 which can

serve over 1,000 a night my jaw just dropped. Every table was taken, every seat at their teryiaki bars was occupied and we felt privileged to be escorted upstairs to one of their private dining rooms which are so popular pre- Christmas that they can be occupied by three different parties with the earliest sitting down at 1530.

The diverse origins of the principal chefs - Vietnam, Canton and Indonesia - were only matched by our waiter who hailed from Tipperary, Co Cork and who confessed that the professional highlight of his career had taken place a fortnight earlier when Dave Crosby (of The Byrds and Crosby, Stills & Nash) had sung 'It's a Long way to Tipperary' after dinner.

For us he explained that the essentially spicy nature of the chefs' food had been toned down for their customers' American palates which accounts for the fact that we found most of the dishes hot rather than intriguingly complex. But as a place to have fun, and probably to be an investor, Wild Ginger is hard to beat.

Seattle may not yet have left quite as distinctive a stamp on the food world as it has done so successfully with coffee but in a city whose local newspaper runs a regular feature entitled 'Practical Geniuses of Technology' this is surely not likely to be too far in the future.

Café Vivace, 901 East Denny Way, 206-860 5869,
Salumi, 309 Third Avenue South, 206-621 8772,
The Dahlia Lounge, 201 Fourth Avenue, 206-682 4142,
Wild Ginger, 1401 Third Avenue 206-623 4450.

* American readers can avail themselves of the new season's wild salmon via www.freshseafood.com in Seattle who ship fresh fish by overnight air express anywhere in the US. Equally delicious are the hand dipped caramels topped with grey sea salt from Fran's chocolates, www.franschocolates.com