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Today's Success Story Br

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Inspired by immigrant success stories

I spent an inspiring evening at the residence of the Ambassador of Spain last night, where the New York City-based Vilcek Foundation held a reception to honor Washington celebrity chef Jose Andres, a 2010 recipient of the organization's fifth annual immigrant achievement awards.

The foundation was started by Czechoslovakian-born immigrants Jan and Marica Vilcek to pay tribute to foreign-born contributors to the arts and sciences in the United States. Jan Vilcek, a microbiology professor at New York University School of Medicine, has given NYU more than \$100 million in royalties from a treatment he helped develop for rheumatoid arthritis.

The foundation he created with his wife, an art historian, honors two immigrants each year who fuel innovation and enrich society--one for achievement in the biological sciences and one for excellence in the arts. Andres was awarded for his contribution to culinary arts. The winner in the biomedical category this year is Russian-born biochemist Alexander Varshavsky, a professor of cell biology at Cal Tech who has done work that could lead to breakthroughs in cancer treatment. Each was awarded \$50,000 and a sculpture created by designer Stefan Sagmeister.

Andres, owner of eight acclaimed restaurants in Washington, including Jaleo, Cafe Atlantico and Zaytinya, was feted by the Vilceks and Ambassador of Spain Jorge Dezcallar de Mazarredo and his wife Teresa. Dezcallar called him the unofficial ambassador to Spain and discussed Andres' commitment to bringing Spanish food, wine and culture to America.

"I have been an immigrant all my life," Andres told the 125 guests, who sipped Spanish wine and sampled hors d'oeuvres including potato and chorizo, a spicy sausage, saffron gum drops and chocolates infused with salt.

Andres said that he had been welcomed warmly in the United States and had always felt embraced by his adopted country. He discussed the opportunities that had been presented to him as an immigrant and his interest in sparking a national conversation about food. Staffers said he will use the prize money to start a foundation to establish a food policy.

The foundation also recognizes the accomplishments of younger immigrants with its Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise. Last night, Laos-born pastry chef Varin Keokitvon, who trains homeless and disadvantaged women and men to become independent through working as chefs at FareStart in Seattle, said that he had turned to cooking after "making some bad decisions" as a teenager. He discussed the metamorphosis of the people he works with. "It is truly amazing to see what happens," he said, after they establish a skill that can move into the ranks of the working.

Amazing people. Great evening.

BY AVIS THOMAS-LESTER | MARCH 10, 2010; 7:13 AM ET

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