



Dennis Marron is the executive chef at both Jackson 20 and The Grille at Morrison House in Alexandria.

ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

High-energy cooking

Old Town chef hated washing dishes, but found another reason to love the kitchen

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

With his crinkly dark hair, slender build and cheerful smile, Dennis Marron looks like the prototype of the mischievous Irish prankster. He's Irish, all right, but Marron is a native New Jerseyan, raised on the Jersey shore. And he's got plenty to smile about: Marron was recently named to his second chef's job, making him executive chef of both The Grille at the Morrison House and Old Town's Jackson 20 restaurants.

Because the two locations are near each other, it's easy to imagine Marron running back and forth along King Street, from one kitchen to the other. But this high-energy guy, who competed in last fall's Marine Corps Marathon, takes this double duty in stride. Indeed, he gets to play around with several culinary passions: classic cooking with an unexpected twist — think Caesar salad with grilled romaine lettuce and large brioche cubes infused with garlicky dressing at The Grille — and, at Jackson 20, comfort food with chophouse and Southern influences. That would be fried chicken, ribs and shrimp fritters at their crunchiest.

"I have food dreams," he says, "and I wake up at 6 a.m. with ideas," which must account for such devices as brioche croutons.

What has it taken for Marron to get to this hectic point? For one, obviously many hours in the kitchen. "I hated school," he says, "so I was mostly in and out of kitchens because I needed money for a new surfboard." Employed as a dishwasher then, Marron vowed he would never work in a kitchen again.

But Marron had started cooking by the time he was 6 years old, and

Do you cook at home?

I do, and it's very simple and usually on the grill. ... I have a fire pit and a wood-burning grill for steak, chicken, mussels, all over hickory wood. My goal is to do all on the grill. I don't like to be inside.

What is your comfort food?

Chocolate. It's ingrained in my head. I love expensive chocolate, but I could eat a whole bag of peanut M&Ms.

What is your luckiest moment?

Getting the approval from so many chefs. So many people have taken

chances on me. And I've had the chance to work with really nice people.

Where's your favorite restaurant?

Depends on why I'm looking for. Two Amy's, or a bar with charcuterie, Ben's Chili Bowl, CityZen, and VOLT.

Which is your favorite cuisine?

I think that is so hard to answer. Everything depends on the mood, but good Thai, Mexican, sushi and Indian. But if I had to eat only one thing for the rest of my life, it would be barbecue.

hung out in the kitchen at home.

"I liked to cook things," he says, "but none of it was edible. My mother cooked Old World dishes like beef tongue and liver, and she always went to farmers markets in the summer. We had farms and orchards nearby, and I loved the aroma of warmed fruits there."

The lure of the cookpot overcame his dislike of dishwashing, and Marron moved on as fry cook at a local fish-fry house. While in college, he worked with several chefs who had graduated from the Culinary Institute of America, and the young Marron made his career choice by enrolling in the CIA.

"I loved it," he says. "I did an externship in Hawaii for 6 months, and that kicked me towards working with fusion cooking."

Upon his return to the mainland, Marron skipped around from state to state and kitchen to kitchen, working as chef, bartender and even front-of-the-house manager. In the course of his culinary wanderings, he picked up knowledge about New Orleans, Southwestern and Asian foods, and even polished his sushi making skills. When he eventually made his way to D.C. four years ago, Marron worked first with Jeffrey Buben at Bistro Bis before heading across the river to Alexandria.

Now as he looks back at the course of his career, Marron cred-

IF YOU GO Jackson 20

- **Where:** 480 King St., Alexandria
- **Info:** 703-842-2790
- **Hours:** 7 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 8 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Sunday

The Grille at the Morrison House Hotel

- **Where:** Morrison House Hotel, 116 S. Alfred St., Alexandria
- **Info:** 703-838-8000
- **Hours:** Breakfast, Monday to Friday, 7 a.m. to 10 a.m., Saturday and Sunday, 8 a.m. to 10 a.m.; Sunday brunch, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.; Dinner, Sunday to Thursday, 6 to 9 p.m., Friday and Saturday, to 10 p.m.

For more on this chef, visit washingtonexaminer.com

its his mother and his family for his enduring passion for cooking.

"She let me touch, taste and smell," he says. As for the finishing gloss, that goes to all the chefs with whom he has worked and whom he has met. And to Buben, a hat tip for teaching him how to manage a kitchen.

Scott Greenberg » The Vine Guy Marvelous, maligned Merlot

Some recoveries happen more quickly than others. A light scratch can heal overnight, while a deep cut can take days or even weeks to repair. But when you are an innocent grape varietal, unfairly maligned at the expense of a Hollywood movie plot, well, it can take quite a while to bounce back. Thus is the fate of Merlot, whose character assassination was offered up as the antagonist in the 2004 movie "Sideways."

While the wine-themed tale of love and woe certainly helped bring Central Coast (California) wines — particularly pinot noir — into the spotlight, it is no secret that shortly following the movie's release, sales of Merlot dropped more than 10 percent in the United States. Thanks, in part, to the now-famous quote in which Paul Giamatti's grouchy wineputz-of-a-character, Miles, confides to his friend before a dinner date, "If anyone orders Merlot, I'm leaving. I am not drinking any [explicative] Merlot." Mark Oldman, author of "Oldman's Guide to Outsmarting Wine" dubbed the phenomenon "The 'Sideways' effect." Fast-forward five years later and Merlot is thankfully on the mend and back on the shelves.

But the Merlot grape is used to fads. After all, it is one of the oldest documented grape varieties around, dating back to the first century. It's also one of the most versatile red wine grapes. It can handle the spotlight as a solo act as well as share the stage, where it can blend in as part of an ensemble cast. And while it has a thin skin that makes it vulnerable to early spring frosts and damage from hungry birds and insects, it can thrive in soil conditions too moist or too poor for other traditional red wine grape vines. It's at home in Bordeaux — thought to be its original home — where it is coveted for its full, round-bodied qualities, and abroad — particularly in California — where warm, sunnier climates bring out dark fruit and mocha characteristics.

Best of all, Merlot wines are built for springtime enjoyment. As the weather oscillates between warming up and cooling down, Merlot strikes the perfect balance. It's rich and powerful enough to pair with hearty fare on a cool night and mellow enough to chill out with on warm evenings while enjoying grilled salmon or tuna. It is the proverbial utility infielder of wine; versatile, invaluable to have in the lineup and often taken for granted.

I, for one, am thrilled with Merlot's recovery. I will no longer have to endure those "side-ways" glances when I break out a bottle of marvelous, multitiered Merlot. And neither will you. Retail prices

are approximate.

2006 Cellar No. 8 Merlot, California (\$10)

A great value for a "house" Merlot. The majority of the grapes come from vineyards surrounding the Asti winery in Sonoma, but additional grapes are used from Alexander Valley and Napa Valley to add depth and flavor. Aromas of black cherry and cedar join flavors of black plum, mocha and roasted coffee on a well-rounded frame. The smooth, medium finish emphasizes notes of leather.

2006 Sean Minor Four Bears Merlot, Napa Valley (\$17)

A pretty-styled wine, this Merlot features scents of black plum, roses and chocolate on the fragrant bouquet. Flavors of dark plum, black cherry, spice and clove provide remarkable depth across the entire palate. The rich, lingering finish shows off touches of mineral and cocoa.

2005 Clos du Val Merlot, Napa Valley (\$26)

The complex nose features aromas of blackberry, cherry liqueur, black olives and sage. The palate is treated to layers of blackberry, dark plum, cocoa, pepper and clove with great balance and structure. The soft tannins provide a lush, elegant finish.

2005 Eagle's Trace Merlot, Napa Valley (\$50)

This wine shows how big and ripe Merlot can be. It delivers aromas of blackberry, cedar, cinnamon, clove and red plum. The wine has good depth and concentration, with ripe flavors of blackberry, cassis, roasted coffee and cocoa. Notes of minerals and dark-chocolate-covered oranges round out the long, beautiful finish.

2005 Matanzas Creek Merlot Bennett Valley, Sonoma Count (\$35)

I really like the Merlots from Sonoma Valley. They seem to have a distinct aroma of fresh herbs, and this wine definitely expresses that characteristic on the nose, along with scents of clove and red berry. The soft tannins and beautiful balance accent flavors of blackberry, dark cherry, orange spice and black pepper.

2003 Etude Merlot, Sonoma Valley (\$35)

Another great example from Sonoma, this version features aromas of blackberry, dark plum, black olive and dried spices. The forward flavors of black current, dark cherry, plum and roasted coffee strike a nice balance between richness and power. The sweet tannins keep the fruit in check and the structure in place. A touch of spice on the long finish adds a memorable touch.

