

PROFILES



ANDREW HARNIK/THE EXAMINER

Twenty-six-year-old Baltimore native Andrew Markert is executive chef at Tallula in Arlington.

Young chef not short on creativity

Tallula's chef, Andrew Markert, describes his fare as 'playful, fun New American'

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

Working 70 to 80 hours a week seems like child's play to this young, hip and extremely energetic executive chef at Arlington's young, hip and extremely energetic Tallula Restaurant, part of the Neighborhood Restaurant Group.

New to his post, Andrew Markert is not new to the group's network of local restaurants and their kitchens, having served as the chef de cuisine under chef Anthony Chittum at Vermilion, the group's contemporary American restaurant in Old Town Alexandria.

Indeed, Markert is no newcomer to kitchen duty — not by a long shot. This Baltimore native concedes that he was never really into books and studying, preferring, instead, to do his own type of learning in the kitchen.

"I was always experimenting," he says. "My family was big into cooking, crab fests, corn and talking. Both my parents cook a lot: My dad is good with spaghetti and meatballs; my mom does everything else."

And, he notes, his tattoos are a memorial to his food-oriented godparents, with a butcher's scene inked on his rib cage. (Note: He did not display it.)

Now at the tender age of 26, Markert looks back over a short lifetime of kitchen work, saying

Caramel Popcorn

Serves about 4

- » 2 1/2 quarts popped popcorn
- » 1/2 cup butter
- » 1 cup brown sugar
- » 1/2 cup corn syrup
- » 1 tsp. salt
- » 1/4 tsp. baking soda

Preheat the oven to 250 degrees. Place the popcorn in a very large bowl. In a

medium saucepan over medium heat, melt butter. Stir in the brown sugar, corn syrup and salt. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Boil without stirring for 4 minutes. Remove from the heat, and stir in baking soda. Pour the mixture in a thin stream over the popcorn, stirring to coat. Place the mixture on a large baking sheet and bake, stirring every 15 minutes, for 1 hour. Remove from the oven and let cool completely before breaking it into pieces.

IF YOU GO: Tallula Restaurant

- » **Where:** 2761 Washington Blvd., Arlington
- » **Contact:** 703-778-5051
- » **Hours:** 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 5:30 to 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday; Brunch — 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

that for the past 11 years he's been in and out of kitchens here and overseas. He got his first break in high school, when a Culinary Institute of America-trained chef, a friend of his father's, gave him a job in a kitchen. Subsequently, he worked as a farmer with a nighttime job working as a line cook, attended Johnson & Wales, where he received a bachelor's degree in culinary arts, and among other places, worked at D.C.'s august Citronelle as a line cook.

"I did that just to see if I could do it," he says of this very rigorous kitchen experience. "It was intense and fun."

But for the present, he says, he intends to stay with the American casual dining scene as he develops

his style, which he describes as "melting pot" and "playful, fun New American." How does that play out on the plate?

"Well, it consists of different components," he says, "such as duck with caramel corn (his signature dish) or pasta with jasmine tea worked into the pasta dough or blueberry jam with a rack of lamb. I got this last idea from a dessert I used to do in Rhode Island."

Where else does he get these ideas, one wonders. He answers that he turns often to the "The Flavor Bible: The Essential Guide to Culinary Creativity" so he does not crib ideas from another chef. Then he goes on to describe his rabbit pappardelle with candied pearl onions and pistachio froth, and you have to think that "The Flavor Bible" stirs up some offbeat ideas, so much that the word "playful" doesn't quite sum it up.

Despite these culinary whimsies, Markert says that some day, once he feels his skills are matured and well honed, he wants to own his own restaurant and return to the "fine-dining" kitchen philosophy he witnessed at Citronelle. And the restaurant's name would be what? Why, Vanilla, of course.

THE VINE GUY

Digging for gold at wine competition

By Scott Greenberg

What do vidal blanc from Virginia, albarino from California and shiraz from Australia all have in common? Well, they all recently garnered top awards at the 28th annual International Wine Competition in San Francisco where the city-by-the-bay played host for the contest, sponsored by Taste magazine.

Winemakers from around the globe — 23 states and 23 countries — submitted more than 4,200 wines from 1,205 wineries to be judged in several different categories, including best white wine, best red wine, best sparkling wine, best dessert wine and so on. The competition is the brainchild of legendary wine taster and magazine publisher Anthony Dias Blue. It was his vision and his goal to showcase wines that don't often receive the same attention as, say, first-growth Bordeaux or California cult cabernets.

In addition to his role as executive director and founder of the San Francisco International Wine Competition, Anthony also heads up the San Francisco World Spirits Competition. He is recognized worldwide as a leading food, wine, travel and spirits authority. Currently, his work reaches more than 30 million consumers each month through a variety of media outlets, including his Tasting Panel Magazine, a monthly magazine that caters to a diverse group of professionals in the wine and spirits industry, including retail shops, restaurants, importers and distributors.

Blue is a James Beard Award-winner for his commentaries, "The Blue Lifestyle Minute," which are broadcast daily on both KFVB in Los Angeles and WCBS in New York. He also hosts a weekly live radio show devoted to spirits and cocktails, called "The Happy Hour," which airs in Los Angeles on KLSX-FM. Lastly, in addition to his role as owner and editor in chief of Patterson's Tasting Panel magazine, Blue frequently contributes to Decanter, Robb Report, Celebrated Living, Virtuoso Life and C Magazine. Blue is the author of "The Complete Book of Mixed Drinks" and its companion, "The Complete Book of Spirits."

But one of the favorite projects is the International Wine Competition. According to Blue, "The ... competition, is the largest, most influential international wine competition in America, judged by a prestigious panel of nationally recognized wine experts."

Judging is based on a blind, consensus procedure, ensuring that its rigor and integrity remain the nation's most respected competition.

The medal count for the 2008 competition included 125 Double Gold, 180 Gold, 941 Silver and 1,593 Bronze.

In a whistle-stop tour, Anthony brought many of the Gold and

Double Gold winners — more than 20 — to Washington to show off the best wines from the competition. The good news is that several of the top winners sell for less than \$25 — a virtual bargain for the pure enjoyment these wines deliver. Here are several of my favorites from Blue's event. Retail prices are approximate and subject to change.

2007 Cambiata Winery Albarino, Monterey, Calif. (\$25 — Gold)

A charming white wine usually associated more with vineyards located in Spain and Portugal than in the Central Coast of California. This version features pretty flavors of apricot, peach and Mandarin orange on the midpalate. Notes of nectarine are carried across the rich, lengthy finish.

2007 Starborough Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$13 — Best Sauvignon Blanc)

A lush, vibrant bouquet of grapefruit, gooseberry and creamy lemon captivate the nose. On the palate, the wine delivers loads of fresh fruit, including honeydew melon, passion fruit and nectarine, all nicely integrated over a citrus-based frame that delivers a crisp, refreshing finish.

2007 Flying Fish Riesling, Columbia Valley, Washington state (\$13 — Best Riesling)

My notes literally say "wow" — and I couldn't agree more. Generous scents of grapefruit and melon provide a pleasing bouquet. Gobs of citrus fruit — including Key lime and Meyer lemon — are kept in balance by the crisp acidity. The wine has just a hint of residual sugar that adds just a touch of richness on the long, full finish.

2007 Gray Ghost Late Harvest Vidal Blanc "Adieu," Amissville, Va. (\$23/ half bottle)

Yes, I said Virginia. The much maligned vidal grape produces a dessert wine that is bursting with candied apricots and ripe peaches on the aromatic nose. Flavors of tropical fruits, honey, creme caramel and roasted almonds are balanced nicely on the sweet-but-not-cloying frame thanks to the perfect-pitch acidity that keeps it light and clean on the palate. Hint of pineapple shines through on the long, lingering finish.

2006 Yangarra Estate Vineyard Shiraz, McLaren Vale, Australia (\$25 — Best Shiraz)

This is a great value-oriented shiraz featuring notes of spicy plum, dark raspberry and vanilla on the expressive bouquet. The palate features gorgeous flavors of blackberry, dark plum, dark chocolate and spicy pepper that spreads across the tongue like a warm blanket. Undertones of vanilla meld with soft tannins to provide a lingering, memorable finish.