

FOOD&WINE



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Rusty Holman is the executive chef at Eatonville in D.C., an eatery infused with Southern flair.

Rooted in delicious

Eatonville chef's Southern training means delicious food for visitors

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Examiner

When you size up the quiet, composed executive chef Russell "Rusty" Holman in the flamboyant, jazzy setting of D.C.'s Eatonville Restaurant, you may wonder why this modest young man isn't serving up vegan fare in a library's dining room.

How does he keep up with the very flashy and demanding crowds who want more, more, more of his solid Southern cooking?

At least, you realize, he is Southern, so knowing how to whip up to-die-for fried chicken brined overnight, with mashed potatoes and the catfish perched on jalapeno-spiked cheddar grits, must be part of his heritage.

(To understand the Southern food cravings at Eatonville, you should know the restaurant commemorates the life and times of author and Howard University graduate Zora Neal Hurston, of Eatonville, Fla. The town of Eatonville, which was founded in 1887 by a group of former slaves, became the oldest African-American municipality in the United States.)

A native of Durham, N.C., who finished high school in Roanoke, Va., Holman had plenty of homebound inspiration and experience.

"My mother is a great cook," he said, noting she sometimes helps cook in the restaurant kitchen. During opening week, she helped shape and finalize the restaurant's dessert recipes.

"She made gourmet meals every night, and she gave me a subscription to Bon Appetit magazine when I was

What's your comfort food?

Steak and baked potatoes, or maybe pizza at 2 a.m.

What is your approach to cooking?

I cook seasonally and use the freshest, highest-quality ingredients. It's important for me to know for whom I am cooking, and that helps me to know what I want to cook.

Which chef has inspired you the most?

Probably the one I've worked

with in Cache Cache Bistro in Aspen. That was Chris Lanter. He brought me to the second level and honed my skills in fine dining.

Which are your favorite restaurants?

Central, and I really enjoy that. And Proof.

Which are your favorite cuisines?

Asian when I go out — a lot of sushi — and Southwestern cuisines. To cook, new American.

growing up," he said.

Finally, in college at the University of Georgia, Holman began to take his cooking seriously, preparing interesting meals for friends. Upon graduation, Holman headed to foodie mecca San Francisco, where after working some temporary office jobs to earn tuition, he enrolled at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco. While studying there, he took advantage of his locale and worked in several local restaurants, including stints at Jeremiah Tower's notable Stars and at The Black Cat restaurants.

After graduation, Holman worked as a private chef in California and later in Spain. Having further broadened his experiences, Holman was hired as the sous chef for the upscale Cache Cache restaurant in Aspen, Colo.

"That place really influenced me," he says.

From there, he worked as executive chef at Mimosa Grill, an upscale restaurant in Charlotte, N.C.

As fate would have it, Holman moved to Washington to work as the executive chef of The Rookery in Georgetown. Then one day while scanning Craigslist ads, Holman spotted a listing for a "Top

IF YOU GO Eatonville

- » **Where:** 2121 14th St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-332-9672
- » **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 5 to 11:30 p.m. Monday to Saturday; 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5 to 11:30 p.m. Sunday

Chef"-style competition to fill the executive chef's position for what was to become Eatonville.

"There were 300 applicants," he says. "We were narrowed down to 12 for the cook-off. We had five or six competitions. I was a runner-up, but my understanding of simple Southern cuisine helped me."

Luckily, his Southern upbringing has served him well, and now overseeing this very busy kitchen, Holman reports that his hush puppies, the fried chicken breast and the catfish really are very popular.

As for his own personal favorites? It's the pan-fried pork chop and the pecan-crusted trout. Not bad, not bad, indeed. And how about a wedge of the oatmeal pecan pie for dessert?

Scott Greenberg » The Vine Guy Chalk one up for Chalk Hill

Have you ever had a notion that you just believed to be true? A theory that you clung to without evidence or proof? Just a little idea that seemed harmless, yet totally authentic? Like the idea that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Or that there is life on other planets. Or the ridiculous theory that Chalk Hill Estates makes wines other than chardonnay. Why, that's just crazy talk.

Well, that last one I was pretty sure of, at least until I sat down a couple of months ago with Chalk Hill Winery co-owner Peggy Furth for lunch and learned that I had been — evidently — living in my own private Idaho. Peggy calmly and politely — she is a reformed lobbyist, so she's really good at making people like me not feel totally dim-witted — pointed out that Chalk Hill produced wines from several other varietals in addition to its notable chardonnay.

Peggy, a strikingly attractive, statuesque blonde blessed with a dazzling smile, began talking me off the Chardonnay Ledge by delving into Chalk Hill's history. She explained that a long, long time ago, the region that is now the Chalk Hill appellation, located in Sonoma Valley, Calif., was home to glaciers, oceans and rivers that successively carved and molded the fertile hillsides. The diverse composition of soils found in the appellation ranges from gravel and rock to heavy clay and loam, including a distinctive layer of chalk-colored volcanic ash — left by Mount St. Helena's last eruption several thousand years ago — that runs under the topsoil of a specific hill and from which Chalk Hill takes its name.

The modern version of the Chalk Hill estate began in 1972, when Peggy's husband, lawyer/private pilot/philanthropist Fred Furth, rented a plane and flew over the Sonoma Valley region, scouting property for a new winery. He initially purchased 242 acres of land in a hilly area and, through the years, continued to acquire parcels. Today, the 1,400-acre estate is home to sports fields, fishing and swimming ponds, guesthouses, 350 acres of vineyards and, of course, the winery. The property also features a state-of-the-art equestrian pavilion where Peggy, a dressage enthusiast, rides almost every day at either the estate's indoor riding rink or in the hillside vineyards.

But the true heart and soul of the winery is, indeed, the wines. And thanks to the appointment of Jordan Fiorentini as director of winemaking operations last year, the wines — even those that are not chardonnay — at Chalk Hill are looking better than ever. An interesting blend of ana-

lytic (she earned her undergraduate degree in engineering from Dartmouth College) and artist (she earned her master's degree in viticulture and enology from the University of California at Davis), Fiorentini is utilizing the skills she honed while working at Araujo Estate in Napa and Antinori in Tuscany to craft beautifully balanced wines in the heart of the Chalk Hill appellation.

After having sampled the portfolio, I am pleased to discover that Chalk Hill Vineyards means more than just chardonnay. And, evidently, that I am not too old to learn something new. Retail prices are approximate.

2006 Chalk Hill Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc, Sonoma, Calif. (\$30)

A touch of sauvignon gris (an heirloom varietal) is blended with nine sauvignon blanc clones and then aged 50 percent in used oak and 50 percent in stainless steel. The result produces a wine that exudes flavors of white peach, nectarine and pineapple. The creamy texture is a nice touch and gives the crisp finish depth and character.

2006 Chalk Hill Vineyards Estate Chardonnay, Sonoma, Calif. (\$48)

Barrel fermented with native yeasts and bottled without filtration, this is the wine that I associate with Chalk Hill. A beautiful bouquet of pear, peach and roasted nut charms the nose while intricate flavors of apple, nectarine and pear sit squarely on a citrus-oriented base. The creamy mouthfeel provides a lush, long finish, kept in remarkable balance by hints of mineral undertones and abundant acidity.

2006 Chalk Hill Vineyards Estate Merlot, Sonoma, Calif. (\$50)

The addition of 20 percent Malbec gives this merlot structure and depth while still maintaining an elegant charm. The charming scents of violets and lavender delicately waft on the nose while delicious flavors of plum, bark cherry, blueberry, chocolate and cinnamon glide over the tongue and onto the medium-bodied finish.

2005 Chalk Hill Vineyards Estate Cabernet Sauvignon, Sonoma, Calif. (\$65)

This is the wine that shattered the "Chalk Hill is for chardonnay only" myth. Grown in several diverse microclimates of hillside terrains and sunny exposures, this bordeaux-styled red also includes small amounts of malbec, merlot, petit verdot and cabernet franc. Earthy aromas of cassis, earth and lead pencil lead into flavors of blackberry, black plum, espresso and spice on the palate. The long, perfectly balanced finish features just a touch of tobacco.

