

PROFILE

## Simple and sweet

*Equinox's Melanie Parker finds creative inspiration in pastries, desserts*

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Examiner

Like many young chefs before her, Maryland native Melanie Parker fell in love with cooking when she was just a kid, long before the words “career” and “culinary” had any meaning.

“I always watched cooking shows,” she says, “especially Julia Child.”

And at a tender, young age, Parker headed to the stove to start on what would be her life's work.

“I started cooking at the age of 8,” she says. “I made bacon and eggs for breakfast.”

From bacon and eggs, Parker graduated to adding scallions and ham to pasta, a flawed effort she calls “nasty.” But she successfully made her own ice cream base, and, thus, her star was born. Today, Parker is featured as the pastry chef at D.C.'s ultra-swish Equinox, owned by RAMMY award-winning chef Todd Gray.

All that aside, by the age of 12, Parker was on her own in the kitchen, whipping up family dinners and earning the praise of her parents — both good cooks.

“I was always in the kitchen helping my mom and dad cook,” she says.

Not surprisingly, she decided early on that she would go to culinary school, and after she graduated from high school, applied to and attended Maryland's own L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg.

“I wanted to be a savory chef,” she says, interning at M&S Grill, Cafe 15 in the Sofitel Lafayette Square, and B. Smith's.

But her career path took a different turn when Parker ended up working at Kinkead's with Executive Chef Tracy O'Grady.

“I met with Tracy,” she says, “and the first day I started, she said ‘See you at 8 a.m.’ That was my first real kitchen experience.”

The experience included working three different stations. Among these: plating pastries for dessert.

“I was always watching the pastry chef, Chris Kajula, and I decided that that's what I wanted to do. ... Just pastry.”



**IF YOU GO:**  
**Equinox Restaurant**

» **Where:** 818 Connecticut Ave. NW  
» **Contact:** 202-331-8118  
» **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5:30 to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Friday; 5:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Saturday; 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday

Melanie Parker is the pastry chef at Equinox Restaurant on Connecticut Avenue.

She assisted Kajula, starting with simple elements, like making ganache and finally advancing to pastry assistant.

Parker returned to L'Academie to earn her degree in pastry arts, after which she worked at such local restaurants as Black Salt and Addie's.

“All the jobs in the last nine years since working at Kinkead's have been in pastry. I moved along, and kept on learning,” she says.

Now an accomplished pastry chef acknowledged by her peers — for one, Parker was nominated for Pastry Chef of the Year at this year's RAMMY's — Parker reflects on the style she has developed.

“It's a combination of savory and sweet,” she says. “It's a little out there. For example, I have a fig and ginger soup with fried corn pudding and a Gorgonzola cheese-port reduction.”

Another offering, her pear frangipane, includes poached pears, a balsamic reduction and goat cheese ice cream.

“These are not your usual brownie sundaes,” she says, something of an

understatement.

Not surprisingly, Parker's boss is wowed by her creations, for these keep pace with Gray's own take on seasonal savory dishes. And not surprisingly, Parker's parents are wowed as well.

“My parents say, ‘Go, girl!’ ” she says.

**Q&A**

**Do you cook at home?**

Sometimes, but I have a long day and a 2-year-old at home. I cooked spaghetti last night.

**What's your comfort food?**

Baskin-Robbins' New York Cheesecake ice cream. Otherwise, I'm a meat-and-potatoes chick, like rare roast beef and baked potatoes loaded.

**How do you define your cooking style?**

It's very composed, thoughtfully planned. I get ideas from books or I saw something I haven't tried. A carrot cake? What goes with it? Apple? Cream cheese frosting with vanilla bean and cardamom. It's soft, so it needs some crunch. I thought about the creamsicle pop (a dessert option at Equinox) last Sunday when I was driving my daughter back from the ER. Sometimes it's a little out there. Sometimes it doesn't turn out.

**Which is your favorite restaurant?**

I rarely eat at fine-dining restaurants, but my favorite place is a seafood restaurant in Bowie, Md.

**What are your pantry basics?**

Confectioners' sugar, always a citrus, milk, butter, eggs, light brown sugar

THE VINE GUY AND GAL

## The Vine Guy and Gal's annual Thanksgiving wine review

Scott and Cindy Greenberg

Every year we great the Thanksgiving holiday with a mixture of joy and dread. It is by far and away our favorite holiday since we get an opportunity to spend the day with family and friends and celebrate with a traditional meal. But we always have just a tinge of fear when it comes to actually picking out the wines we want to pair with dinner.

Why are we so tentative about committing to the obvious beverage of choice for America's biggest holiday? Well, for starters, there tends to be a variety of courses competing for space on the table and on the tongue, so pairing a wine with a typical Thanksgiving meal can be tricky. Secondly, there is a wide range of guests whose taste may not be in sync with our own. We still remember one year when a particular guest just did not like a single wine we served, describing most of them as “too hot.” It wasn't until — out of desperation — we reached for a long neglected bottle of Manischewitz wine that our guest was finally satisfied. Who knew?

While we can't help you pick your guests this Thanksgiving, we can offer a few useful suggestions that should please most palates and pocketbooks. And don't limit yourself to just one of our suggestions. Consider opening several different bottles of wines to enjoy throughout the evening and see what wine goes well with which course and what person. Here are each of our picks for a happy, harmonious — and tasty — feast.

Most wines are available at local area wine shops. Prices are approximate and are subject to change.

**She said**

Lately, I have been gravitating toward white wines. They tend to be versatile without being overwhelming. In addition, their “sweetness” level can be dialed up or down — from bone-dry to off-dry (sweeter) — depending on what you're trying to pair it with.

**Chandon NV Brut Classic Sparkling Wine, Napa Valley, Calif. (\$20) »**

A great way to get the party started, with tight bubbles carrying apples, pears and nectarines on a nutty frame. Toasted brioche notes on the crisp, dry finish complete the scene and gets the palate ready for the rest of the night.

**2006 Condes de Albareil Albarino, Rias Baixas, Spain (\$16)**

Albarino is my new black dress.



This one has a pretty nose of creamy lemon and minerals that complement the flavors of lemon, lime, melon and mint that stay tight and fresh in the mouth thanks to abundant acidity.

**2007 Robert Mondavi Private Selection Riesling, Monterey County, Calif. (\$9)**

I had to look at the price twice because this wine delivers way beyond its price tag. It fills the mouth with rich apricot, peach, nectarine and Honey Crisp apple. The citrus-based finish keeps the palate refreshed and ready for the next sip.

**NV Etude Pinot Gris Carneros, Calif. (\$23)**

This is the wine we're having with our turkey this year. Scents of peach, white nectarine and orange blossom fill the bouquet. Juicy stone fruits glide over the tongue and get an exotic leg up from notes of clove and ginger on the elegant finish.

**He said**

I like to move through wine varieties at dinner the same way I like to eat; start off with a wine to whet my appetite, move on to something a little more substantial and then end with a big finale.

**NV Canella Prosecco di Conegliano, DOC, Veneto, Italy (\$20)**

As with many Italian wines, Prosecco is both a place and a grape and makes the region's most popular sparkling wine. This version has just a hint of sweetness that adds to the depth and clarity of the green apple, stone fruit and apricot flavors. Crisp acidity keeps the wine focused on the entire palate.

**2005 Domaine Lucien Albrecht Tokay-Pinot Gris Cuvee Cecile, Alsace, France (\$22)**

Another choice that features just a whisper of residual sugar balanced against beautiful acidity. The fragrant bouquet is full of pineapple, lemon zest and lychee nut and leads right into flavors of nectarine and honeysuckle across the palate. Hints of ginger on the tail-end of the finish can hold court with either turkey or sweet potato pie.

**2006 Joseph Drouhin 'Laforet' Pinot Noir, Burgundy, France (\$15)**

For those who simply must have a red wine with turkey, this is a keeper. Full of luscious strawberry, red plum and cherry flavors, the wine has plenty of fruit to please the palate but enough acidity to keep the wine light and bright. It definitely complements the main attraction instead of steals the show.

**2005 David Bruce Petite Sirah, Central Coast, Calif. (\$22)**

This dark, brooding wine certainly has “grip” and can stand up to spicy fare as well as a few desserts. Black plums, dark cherries and black raspberries are rich and chewy on the palate. Hints of dried herbs and cinnamon fall in on the satiny finish like a down pillow.

**Fig-Gingerbread Loaf**

Makes 1 loaf

- » 1/2 ounce dry yeast
- » 2 cups warm whole milk
- » 1/2 cup sugar
- » 3 1/2 to 4 cups all-purpose flour
- » 2 1/2 cups chopped fresh or dried figs (or other dried fruit)
- » 4 tbsp. ground ginger
- » 2 tbsp. butter, softened
- » 2 tsp. salt

In a medium bowl, whisk together the yeast, milk and sugar. Let stand until the yeast foams.

Using a mixer with a dough hook attachment, combine the flour, figs, ginger, butter and salt. Add the yeast mixture slowly to incorporate. Mix the dough on low to medium speed for 5 to 10 minutes, or until smooth and well mixed. Spray an 8-by-4-inch loaf pan and set the dough in it near the warmed oven to rise until doubled in bulk — 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Bake for about 1 hour, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Remove from the oven and cool on a wire rack. Brush with melted butter and let cool for 1 hour.