

Richard Cook reels in the customers at the BlackSalt Fish Market & Restaurant



SAMUEL CORUM/EXAMINER

BlackSalt's young chef fell for cooking hook, line and sinker

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Richard Cook — the bustling, energetic and young executive chef of BlackSalt Fish Market & Restaurant — is a guy who readily admits he started out in the restaurant business as a busboy to earn some fast cash. At that point, he could never have guessed he'd end up running a very busy kitchen that caters to devoted seafood fans.

What steered the Dale City native to a culinary vocation?

"It was boring in the front of the house," he said. "The cooks were having more fun. That looked like my speed. So I asked to be moved to the back [kitchen]."

As a result, he ended up being a pizza cook in Dale City. But that was just the beginning.

Warming to his new profession, Cook moved to a family-owned restaurant that had no chef. In fact, Cook ended up doing everything in the kitchen, including washing the dishes. Ironically, that stint did the trick.

"That got me hooked," he said. "I found I was good at [cooking]."

In a dramatic career move, Cook moved to Georgia to work in a high-end French restaurant, working with a proper chef who had worked at the Inn at Little Washington.

"I saw that people my age were doing a good job, and I wanted to compete," he said. "But I didn't like fancy French food or anything that wasn't basic American cooking."

He even resisted sampling foie gras, but that tasting opened doors for him, making him more willing to sample other exotic fare.

When Cook landed a job at BlackSalt four years ago, he went right on as a line cook on to the grill station all on his own. But he realized that he lacked something critical: a knowledge of seafood.

"I learned that fish are all different," he said. "They have a different texture and flavor."

Working frantically to gain that knowledge, Cook heard from his executive chef to slow down, to taste and to get excited about each plate that

What is your comfort food?

Slow-roasted pork or crispy pork belly. Or a whole fish right in the pan or going to get a bowl of pho.

What has been your luckiest moment?

Everything here. I walked right into it and it was a pretty lucky decision ... being on the spot and being prepared for the wackiest insanity.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

I have to say Vetri in Philadelphia. It's the best Italian restaurant on the

East Coast. In D.C., I am addicted to Palena and Sushi-Ko ... I used to eat out all the time. Oh, and Komi.

What's in your fridge?

I have a little thing of Spanish boquerones, some water and condiments.

Where do you go on vacation?

I spent two weeks in Italy, and last summer, two months in Spain. That gave me a new outlook on life. I am going to South America, Cancun and Peru.

IF YOU GO

BlackSalt Fish Market and Restaurant

» **Where:** 4883 MacArthur Blvd.

» **Info:** 202-342-9101

» **Hours:** Lunch — 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Saturday;
Dinner — 5:30 to 9:30 p.m.
Monday to Thursday, 5:30 to 11 p.m. Friday, 5 to 11 p.m.
Saturday, 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday;
Brunch — 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Sunday

he set up.

"He moved me around," Cook said, while he sipped a cup of dashi, the Japanese seafood stock. "The job has never been a letdown. I am always being educated ... and I am addicted to the fast pace."

Today he is responsible for dreaming up seven to 12 seafood specials a day, seven days a week. As his day starts, Cook walks up in front of the restaurant where its seafood market is located.

"I look at the fish," he said, "and we carry 60 different pieces of seafood. ... We put thought into each dish with a special fish."

Reading books and watching cooking shows on TV may inspire him, but Cook finds seafood has its own influence on him. He may prepare it with an ethnic twist — such as the wood-roasted sturgeon with a cumin-piquillo broth — but he concludes that with seafood, the taste canvas is wide open.

In fact, simply grilling fish moistened with just a drizzle of olive oil may signal a culinary triumph to Cook.

Now at the advanced age of 26, does Cook have any regrets about all the hard work? Not at all, and, in fact, he says his parents are blown away by what he's doing. By the way, what Cook eats these days certainly does not resemble the fish sticks and ketchup of his youth.

Blue Shell Mussels with Chilis and Basil: a serving for 2

- 1 jalapeno chili, seeded and minced
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
- 1 shallot, peeled and minced
- 3 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil, or more as needed
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 2 pounds blue shell mussels, cleaned
- 2 cups fish stock
- 1 cup diced and roasted butternut squash
- 1/2 cup white wine
- 4 oz. (1 stick) unsalted butter
- 1 bay leaf, preferably fresh
- 6 stems fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 stem fresh basil, torn
- Fresh lime juice, to taste

» **Using a large saute pan, heat the chilis, garlic and shallot over medium heat with the olive oil until soft. Season with salt and pepper. Add the fish stock, squash, wine, butter and bay leaf. When the liquid and ingredients have come to a simmer, add the mussels and cover. The mussels are finished when they have all opened. Serve with cilantro, basil and lime juice. Taste, season as needed and enjoy.**

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Family-owned wineries of Napa

Napa is home to some of the most remarkable wineries in the world. Some are large — producing more than 100,000 cases per year! — and some are small — producing fewer than 5,000 cases per year. Many of these operations are family-owned, while larger entities and corporations own other brands. But like many businesses — and make no mistake, making wine is definitely a business — larger corporations are making significant acquisitions, buying up family-owned wineries in Napa Valley and throughout the world.

Now, I have nothing against corporate-owned wineries. Many of them are very dedicated to producing quality wines, and I have written about many excellent wines made by corporate-owned wineries in this column throughout the years. But there is something uniquely charming about family-owned wineries. Somehow, these family-run enterprises seem a bit more intimate. There is something more personal about these wineries, particularly if you are fortunate enough to meet with the family behind the label.

And so it was that Cindy and I recently found ourselves in Napa Valley, in search of family-owned wineries both large and small. Our stay began with the pleasant and delightful accommodations offered at the Wine Country Inn & Gardens, located just outside downtown St. Helena.

Ned and Marge Smith had the idea to build a bed-and-breakfast inn, a la New England. They visited classic inns of that region and decided they wanted to replicate the casual comfort these inns were known for. In addition to the antiques and local artists featured in the charming breakfast area, most rooms are adorned with fireplaces and balconies or patios that afford great views of the surrounding vineyards and gardens. My favorite amenity is the complimentary car service that will take guests to most restaurants in the valley and then pick them up, affording passengers the luxury of enjoying wine with dinner.

Our first day began with Tim Milos, the winemaker for Hidden Ridge Vineyards. Surrounded by gnarled oak and manzanita forests on the southern and western slopes of Spring Mountain in the Mayacamas mountain range, Hidden Ridge Vineyard is so remote only heavy-duty four-wheel-drive vehicles can reach it. Fortunately, Tim had the truck for the drive up the rugged location where the 55-acre vineyard was developed and planted by husband-and-wife team Casidy Ward and Lynn Hofacket. The Oklahoma natives purchased the property in 1991 as a location for a

home in the country. However, the site ultimately proved a better choice for grapes than for people, and they found their cabernet sauvignon thrived on the otherwise inhospitable mountain slopes at elevations ranging from 900 to 1,700 feet.

After six years of developing the vineyard, Hofacket and Ward began selling their cabernet fruit in 2000. In 2001, the couple began to make small batches of wine with their mountain fruit, and the Hidden Ridge label was born. Today, production is up to 3,600 cases, with all of the fruit dedicated for the Hidden Ridge Vineyard label.

At \$45, the **2006 Hidden Ridge Cabernet Sauvignon**, Sonoma is one of the most remarkable bottles of wine out of California I have had the pleasure to sample. It possesses extraordinary elegance, with an expansive nose of black tea, currants, bramble and hints of vanilla. There is purity and depth on the palate, with flavors of blackberry, dark plum and clove. Additional notes of mocha and melted licorice glide in on the plush finish, buoyed by sweet tannins that provide excellent structure now and suggest the ability to age it for another 10-plus years.

Our next stop was the Frank Family Vineyards, located in the former Kornell Champagne Cellars on the site of the historic Larkmead winery in Calistoga. Longtime Disney executive Rich Frank and his wife, Connie, own this operation. In 1992, Rich received a midnight phone call from longtime friend and Napa Valley winery owner Koerner Rombauer, who told him that the Larkmead property was for sale. Twenty-four hours later, Rich and Koerner bought the winery. In January 2007, Rich and his family purchased Rombauer's share and assumed total control of Frank Family Vineyards. Today, it is truly a family affair.

We had the pleasure of tasting through the Frank Family portfolio with winemaker Todd Graff, who joined the winery in 2003. I really liked the

2008 Frank Family Vineyards Napa Valley Chardonnay

(\$35), where scents of white peach, roasted nuts and brioche combine on the fragrant bouquet. Mouth-filling flavors of apple, nectarine and pear fill out the front of the palate

while notes of lemon and toasty oak round out the lush finish. Subtle hints of vanilla add just the right accent, thanks to a judicious use of oak — the wine was barrel-fermented in one-third new oak, one-third once-used oak and one-third twice-used oak. I was equally impressed with the **Napa Valley Zinfandel** (\$38) and **Napa Valley Cabernet Sauvignon** (\$45), which both represent good values for quality Napa wines.

Next Week, part two of three: Homespun family-owned wines

