



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Carla Hall of Alchemy Caterers was once a model, and more recently was a finalist on the fifth season of "Top Chef."

Ex-'Top Chef' star Carla Hall keeps busy

Behind the glamour of the spotlight is a woman who loves food

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to the Washington Examiner

If you meet Carla Hall dressed in street clothes, your first thoughts would probably be "Vogue model," or maybe "Manhattan socialite."

True, Hall was once a model strutting the fashion show runways, so that image resonates. But the truth is she most often wears chef's whites and stands behind stoves stirring up some culinary fantasy — think of her cookie collection, starring such petite edibles as Black Forest crinkles, pecan shortbread with vanilla salt and peanut butter biscotti dipped in dark chocolate. And she runs her own Silver Spring-based catering and personal chef business, Alchemy Caterers.

And if the name Carla Hall sounds really, really familiar, that is probably because you remember her as one of the finalists in last year's "Top Chef" competition, narrowly losing to Hosea Rosenberg. Session after grueling session, viewers watched as she waged kitchen battles with her competition, structuring dish after dish that have probably remained etched in her memory. Of these, Hall cites her favorite as her re-creation of the [New York restaurant] Le Bernardin dish Escalade With Sauce Bearnaise.

What's happened with Hall since those heady days of a year ago?

Well, her life has certainly changed, finding a female chef who once had some local notoriety to someone who now has a national presence. She has appeared on the "Today" show, LXTV, NPR, "Fox Morning News" and other shows, and she now needs her own publicist to structure her speaking, demonstrating and cooking schedules.

"I am really busy," she said. "People don't realize how busy I am. They see the glamour part, but what they don't see is there is a lot of homework. I have to have recipes ready and I

What is your comfort food? It changes. My comfort food is a bowl of soup, any kind of soup. I love greens, so a soup with kale and sweet potatoes is one. This goes back to my Southern soups. And some cornbread. That's my go-to thing as a Southerner from Tennessee. It cannot be sweet.

What is your cooking philosophy? To understand talent and to cook from the heart. And if it is coming from the heart, you don't have to worry about making someone else's food from a recipe. If you are trying to make someone else's, it is not as good. Just really let your talent dictate your food.

Which is your favorite restaurant? It varies. Every Sunday, I think

about Commonwealth. I went there for a Sunday lunch, and I have food memories from England, and that reminds me of London. I recently went to Ris and had a really wonderful meal. They now have a Saturday brunch. I like burgers, and pho, so it varies, so I will go to Spike's place [Good Stuff Eatery].

What is your signature dish? That's hard to say. After the show ["Top Chef"], we did beignets and oyster stew. It's hard to have a signature because in catering, everyone's taste changes. But the one recipe, oyster stew, I am really proud of it. Also the oil-poached escalade I did on the show. I love the complexity of the sauce. It's all because of Eric Ripert. I had to re-create it.

IF YOU GO

Alchemy Caterers

» **Where:** 8810 Brookville Road, Silver Spring
» **Info:** 240-242-9040
» **Hours:** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday to Friday

am doing interviews. That all takes preparation."

In addition, Hall also travels all across the country putting on cooking demonstrations. And, she points out, she still runs a business and stays true to herself and her own vision of recipe creation and food presentation.

"I am suddenly growing so fast," she said, "and I still see myself as a boutique catering company."

Hall also chronicles other changes to her cooking life: For one, she finds that it — and she — are always under scrutiny.

"My cooking is actually under a microscope," she says. "I use this as a good thing, so I keep exploring. So often we can become complacent, but this scrutiny keeps me honest and

exploring."

Indeed, her Southern-influenced cooking — Hall comes from Tennessee — has become more comfort-food-focused. As she notes, she wants people who eat her food to "have a feeling of warmth and of being hugged."

Hall said she finds her worldview has shifted as well, rejoicing when people tell her that what she has cooked has really inspired them.

"Food is meant to be shared and to inspire others," she said. "So when people say they can do it [that is, re-create a recipe or cook well], that is really a gift. That is really exciting to me. Maybe now I am more of a teacher than a caterer."

In the end, all her friends and fans love and admire her, but it's a safe bet that Hall's own mother is the proudest of all.

"My mother is so proud. She is so sweet," Hall said. "She was at a funeral, and everyone came up to her asking, 'What's your daughter doing?' And no matter what my mother is doing, she always asks people, 'Do you watch 'Top Chef?'"

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Wines to spring into season

Spring has most definitely sprung in Washington. If the cherry blossoms aren't proof enough, then the tree pollen building up on cars and inside nasal passages most certainly is.

As the weather warms up, now is a perfect time to start thinking about changing your wardrobe. Your wine wardrobe, that is. As my wife is getting ready to change the bed linens over from flannel to percale and trades in her sweaters and pantsuits for skirts and blouses, I am starting to put away my big winter red wines and looking for something a little — just a little — on the lighter side to drink.

As the months roll toward summer, I gradually begin to change over toward softer-styled wines; whiter whites and pinker roses. During this transition, I still like to keep one corkscrew firmly planted in the cork side of the red wine spectrum. I'm looking for younger red wines that still provide a bit of grip for cool nights but also slide a notch toward brighter fruit and higher acidity that will match up well with seasonal fare and grilled foods. Therefore, I tend to shy away from red wines that are too "big" or have high alcohol levels (over 14 percent can make the wines taste "hot" in hot weather) and look for wines with levels below 12 percent.

Here are a few picks to consider as you transition from dining room table to patio furniture this spring. And make sure to try slipping a few of these red wines in the refrigerator for 15 minutes before serving. Retail prices are approximate.

The obvious choice for me during this time of year is a pretty pinot noir. It just reminds me of kicking back on a warm spring day and taking in the sunshine. The **2007 Sipino Pinot Noir** from Yamhill Valley Vineyards — located in the Willamette Valley of Oregon — reminds me of that feeling. For only \$14, you get a lovely limited-production pinot noir made entirely from estate fruit from Yamhill Valley Vineyard. It features wonderful aromas of red cherry and watermelon. Flavors of strawberry, cherry and red plum are lush and plump in the mouth and carry through nicely onto the medium-bodied finish.

Another pinot noir to consider comes from the French wine region that is synonymous with the varietal: Burgundy. Unlike many pinot noir wines from this exclusive appellation, the **2005 Champy Bourgogne Pinot Noir** will not break

the bank. Twenty-five dollars buys a wine that exudes aromas of dark cherry, red berries and brown sugar. Ripe red-fruit flavors dominate the palate where they are supported by supple tannins and bright acidity. The finish is wonderfully layered and lithe, offering hints of dried herbs and stony minerals.

Of course, beaujolais is a popular warm weather wine. Made from the gamay grape, beaujolais wines work well now and into the hot summer months as well. I love serving beaujolais slightly chilled with burgers or grilled chicken, or slipping it into the picnic basket. Best of all, most Beaujolais are relatively inexpensive. Try the **2008 Georges Duboeuf Julienas La Trin Quee** from one of the largest producers of beaujolais in France. For \$14 you get a pretty wine full of bright, fresh red cherry and plum fruit on the palate. The easy, soft finish is long and refreshing, with hints of pomegranate and raspberry gliding in at the end.

Dolcetto wines are an oft-forgotten variety from the Piedmont region of Italy that produces wines that are soft and fruity and ready to drink when released. They're perfect for picnic lunch or lazy afternoon. At \$17, the **2007 Luciano Sandrone Dolcetto d'Alba** is a great choice to pair with lighter pasta dishes or grilled chicken and pork. The nose has these great aromas of wild flowers and dark plums. Mouthwatering flavors of dark raspberry and red plums are accented by bright acidity up front and notes of plush red cherries on the finish.

Another choice from Piedmont is barbera — a red grape known for producing wines with soft tannins and abundant acidity. At \$20, the **2006 Marchesi di Barolo Barbera Ruvei** from Piedmont offers a delightful bouquet featuring scents of wild flowers, sage and cocoa.

The medium-bodied frame supports flavors of raspberries, red cherries and spices. A hint of crushed stone on the back of the palate adds a touch of elegance on the finish.

If you're adventurous and don't mind being a trendsetter, try starting your next barbecue off with a bottle of Zweigelt.

The **2006 Hillinger Zweigelt** from Austria has a pronounced nose featuring fresh cherry and wild strawberry scents. The flavors of dark cherry, red fruit and black plum are round and juicy on the palate, with hints of baking spices on the lush finish. The soft tannins and \$16 price tag make this wine a great choice with either burgers or steaks.

