

Ron Vasquez spends his days conjuring up recipes for Uncle Julio's Rio Grande Cafe.



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

## Hands down delicious food

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Passionate about Tex-Mex flavors? Dream about fresh tortillas and luscious tacos? Imagine spending every working day sampling frijoles, tucking into fresh guacamole and slicing into a chile relleno just out of the kitchen.

Then you would certainly envy Virginia native Ron Vasquez, director of culinary food and beverage for all the Uncle Julio's Rio Grande Cafes (formerly just Rio Grande Cafe). He spends his workweek doing all that and more.

The "more" is working in conjunction with the company president to produce and perfect novel recipes.

"Our president is an avid cook," he said, "so between us, we work to develop concepts. One of our recent items, fresh fish tacos, just started out with a 'why not?'"

Vasquez goes on to describe in colorful detail one of company President Todd Conger's and his very favorite creations, called the Alambre del Mar, a fish-based entree that also started out as just an idea.

"This is comprised of two skewers," he said, "each with shrimp and other seafood, such as mahi mahi and salmon. It's made with a spicy lime marinade and house-made spices."

Another special that delights him: the four jumbo shrimp with a salpicon stuffing. Sadly, both are house specials and not always available.

Vasquez is a graduate of George Mason University, with a Bachelor of Arts degree in international studies and a minor in global systems — both unrelated to food, cooking and exploring Tex-Mex flavors. And he may have ended up in a far different career had he not started working in such restaurants as Lone Star Steakhouse, Domino's Pizza and

### What is your comfort food?

I am a very simple, basic man. A piece of steak plus rice, something that I can do really quickly. I grill up meat and season it. I love the basics.

### Where is your favorite place?

Canada. I love it. I am hoping to go back next year for a family trip.

### What's in your fridge?

Kids' favorites like ice cream, chicken tenders, steak, ribs. We

just get only what we need. We keep it as fresh as possible.

### What's your favorite restaurant?

I am biased. It's Benihana because of my 19-year-old son. We have gone since he was 5, no matter where we are on vacation. We go to one. It has a great atmosphere.

### Who is your favorite chef?

I love Mr. Iron Chef, Bobby Flay. His demeanor is so normal. What you see is what you get.

### IF YOU GO

#### Uncle Julio's Rio Grande Cafe

- » **Where:** 4251 Fairfax Corner Ave., Fairfax
- » **Info:** 703-266-7760, [unclejulios.com](http://unclejulios.com)
- » **Hours:** 11 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 11 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Sunday

Several other locations in Washington, D.C. area; check website for details.

tain the brand, you don't want to do something just because it's easier," he said.

That could explain the restaurant group's sometimes extreme customer loyalty. Consider the patron, Vasquez said, who came into one of the restaurants 149 days straight and ordered a chicken fajita. This particular gentleman also ate at an Uncle Julio's restaurant a total of 876 times within the last 10 years.

## The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

# Judging wine is much tougher than you think

Swirl, sniff, taste, swish, spit, repeat. Four ... hundred ... times. While it may seem a bit overwhelming, I can think of far worse things to be doing over a long weekend in San Francisco.

It all started when Anthony Dias Blue — Andy, to his friends — invited me to fly out to California to participate as a judge in the 30th annual San Francisco International Wine Competition. Winemakers from around the globe — 28 states and 27 countries — submitted 3,900 wines from 1,290 wineries to be judged in several different categories, including best white wine, best red wine, best sparkling wine and best dessert wine.

The competition is sponsored by the Tasting Panel magazine, a monthly publication that caters to a diverse group of professionals in the wine and spirits industry, including retail shops, restaurants, importers and distributors.

In addition to his role as executive director of the San Francisco International Wine Competition, Blue also is a highly regarded authority on food, wine, travel and spirits, and is the recipient of the prestigious James Beard award for his work. He reaches more than 30 million consumers each month through a variety of media outlets, including the Tasting Panel magazine, his radio show "The Blue Lifestyle Minute," broadcast daily on both KFWB in Los Angeles and WCBS in New York, and a weekly live radio show devoted to spirits and cocktails, called "The Happy Hour," which airs in Los Angeles on KLSX-FM.

But one of his favorite projects is the International Wine Competition. According to Blue, "The diversity and global impact of the wine competition was notable with 27 countries submitting,

six more than last year. We also saw a dramatic display of success from the Paso Robles and Monterey regions and were proud to honor a Hudson Valley riesling from New York with a sweepstakes win. The caliber and variety of the wines tasted was stunning, particularly an extraordinary group of pinot noirs that wowed the judges."

Make no mistake, though. Judging this competition isn't easy. The 45 judges are broken down into about 12 panels,

consisting of three to four judges. Each panel is responsible for tasting a portion of the wines submitted. My panel included John Cunin, general manager of the Bazaar by Jose Andres in Los Angeles, and Kevin M. Vogt, wine and spirits director of Emeril's Restaurants, Las Vegas.

Together, we blind-tasted — the identity of the wines were hidden — about 200 wines each day ranging from sauvignon blanc, riesling and chardonnay to zinfandel, cabernet sauvignon, merlot and various red wine blends. If all three of us agreed that a wine deserved a gold medal, it was awarded double gold and we could submit it to the sweepstakes round on the final day, where it would be evaluated by the entire judging staff. There were a total of 78 wines that made it into the final sweepstakes round.

One of the most valuable lessons I learned from this experience is that you don't need to spend a lot of money to enjoy gold-medal wines. Many of the sweepstakes winners were around \$30 or less. Here are the results — retail prices are approximate.

The big winners of the event, known as "Best in Show," went to: **2009 Whitecliff Vineyard Riesling, New York, \$15**, for Best White Wine. **2008 Sequana Pinot Noir, Sarmento Vineyard, Santa Lucia Highlands, \$32**, won Best Red Wine. **Piper Sonoma NV Blanc de Blancs, Sonoma Coast, \$17**, won for Best Sparkling Wine and **2007 Jackson-Triggs Niagara Estate Vidal Ice Wine, Proprietor's Reserve, Niagara Peninsula, Canada, \$40**, took top honors for Best Dessert Wine.

"Best of Varietal" winners were awarded in 18 categories, and included a Maryland state winery, Elk Run, which took top honors in cabernet franc.

