



SAMUEL CORUM/FOR THE WASHINGTON EXAMINER

Janis McLean is the executive chef at 15 Ria in D.C. McLean has been a part of the area's cooking scene for years.

## From corporate life to cooking

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

A diminutive lady with a ponytail, a cheerful demeanor and a casual approach to her American cooking with gentle French overtones, Janis McLean, now the executive chef of 15 Ria restaurant, has built up a following in her years of capital cooking.

Among the handful of female chefs in the metro area, McLean has certainly earned her street credibility, coming fully into the public's eye years ago when she and a business partner opened the casual Silver Spring eatery, redDog Cafe. There she made her grandmother's macaroni and cheese, a pulled-pork ripieghi (or "fold over" in Italian) sandwich and the cedar-plank salmon — and all got star billing.

But long before the redDog Cafe, McLean — a self-described corporate runaway — had received her culinary training and is a graduate of the professional program at L'Academie de Cuisine when it was in Bethesda (it's now in Gaithersburg) and trained in France at Ann Willan's famed La Varenne in Burgundy. (Note: She has also been a consultant for La Varenne, and has worked closely with Willan on a variety of projects.) McLean also has cooked around D.C. as a former sous chef at both the Morrison-Clark Inn and the now-closed Red Sage. Just before her current kitchen position, McLean returned to the Morrison-Clark as its executive chef.

In her new position, McLean has been challenged to turn a branded hotel restaurant into an independent entity, returning it to its original concept when chef Jamie Leeds ran the kitchen. Faced with the economic downturn, McLean still has managed to create a menu

### What's your comfort food?

Scrambled eggs. When I come home drop-dead tired, I love scrambled egg on toast with truffle salt.

### Which chef do you admire the most?

Alice Waters for what she's done for eating fresh and for sustainable living.

### What's been your luckiest moment?

The moment that Anne Willan called. I was in the right place at the right time. She had lost her U.S. rep and was looking for someone to take on that position. I had just ... started at L'Academie.

that does not resort to standard menu items.

"The guests from the hotel come in to eat," she said, "and they are surprised. They say, 'You are a real restaurant,' and I say, 'Yes.' That's very good, and it pleases me a lot."

Sensitive to the restaurant's price point, however, McLean takes a fish like trout — "I would usually never put this on a dinner menu," she said — and serves it up with a creative twist, on a bed of pastini with shaved fennel and country ham.

"It is really quite tasty," she said. "My cooking has evolved, and it's because I have an opportunity to buy more things from Tuscarora [a farmers co-op from Pennsylvania], so I have broadened my palate."

To give guests a break from heavy meals at the end of the day, McLean has created some serious meat-enhanced entree salads, including a salmon or duck-meat salad served on greens and toasted with roasted (yes, roasted) grapes and applewood-smoked bacon.

### What cooking tip would you pass on to readers?

I teach this in cooking classes: Sautéing is a three-step process. Heat pan first, then the oil, then count to 10 before you put in food. Then the food doesn't stick. Don't put the oil in the pan first because the oil doesn't heat as high.

### What's in your fridge?

My mom lives with us so she has some [leftover] desserts. Eggs and strawberries from the farmers market, beer, lettuce, bacon and a full cheese assortment and olives. So I can have a market dinner anytime.

### IF YOU GO 15 Ria Restaurant

» **Where:** 1515 Rhode Island Ave. NW  
» **Info:** 202-232-7000  
» **Hours:** 6:30 a.m. to 11 a.m., 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. daily

Don't be surprised, however, to find some of McLean's most popular dishes as part of her new menu — those that won her such acclaim at redDog Cafe. Of these is the all-time favorite, the seared scallops served on black "forbidden" rice. Its sauce, with the sweetness of a carrot juice reduction plus smoky chipotles and smooth butter, presents a perfect balance of flavors.

Does McLean miss the slower-paced corporate life? Not for a minute.

"It is really fun to be a chef," she said. "If you didn't love it, you couldn't do it. It takes sweat, time on the feet and burn on the arms."

## Scott Greenberg » The Vine Guy A wine trip through Italy

Italy is one of the few places in the world where wine is produced in literally every region of the country, from the Trentino Alto Adige in the north all the way down to the island of Sicily in the south. It has also been made there for a very, very long time. There is evidence that Etruscan and Greek explorers cultivated wine grapes as far back as the fifth century B.C. But it was the Romans who, 300 years later, developed a widespread wine-making industry and introduced advanced techniques such as barrel fermentation and bottling.

Today, Italy is the largest wine-producing nation in the world, producing more than 9 million metric tons of wine in 2009. And Italians lead the world in wine consumption as well. According to a recent study by the Wine Institute, in 2008 Italians consumed 59 liters of wine per capita. To put that in perspective, the French — who ranked second — consumed 53 liters per capita, while the United States consumed just under 10 liters per capita. So Italians know their wine.

To give you an idea of the wonderful variety of Italian wines, here is a quick tour of the major wine growing regions by way of wines from each area. Retail prices are approximate.

In the most northern section of Italy, high up in the Dolomite Alps, lies the gently sloping hills of Trentino's Valle dei Laghi (Valley of Lakes). Here, vineyards called "masi" enjoy cool, crisp evenings and warm summer days, thanks to the "Ora del Garda" — a dry, balmy breeze that blows in from Lake Garda and keeps the fruit protected (thus the word "garda") from excessive moisture and cold temperatures. These diurnal swings promote intense flavors and abundant acidity, as found in the 2008 Bottega Vinaia Pinot Grigio (\$18). This premium white wine is crisp and fresh with loads of nectarine and stone fruit on the front of the palate and just a touch of bright lime notes on the refreshing finish.

Moving just a tad south into the Veneto district, home to the beautiful city of Verona as well as the Bertani family and its vineyards. More than 150 years ago, brothers Gaetano and Giovan Battista Bertani began purchasing vineyard land in this region and making wine from grapes they grew — a rarity at the time. Today, the Bertani family is still making the wine that made the estate famous: Amarone. The 2006 Bertani Amarone della Valpolicella Valpantena "Villa Arvedi" (\$42) is a

traditional red wine made from corvina veronese and rondinella grapes, which are hand harvested and then carried to farmhouses where they are left to dry on traditional straw mats. After four months, the shriveled grapes are pressed and fermented until the sugars have been completely converted to alcohol. This produces an elixir with a bouquet of prunes, ripe cherries and cassis and layered flavors of dark plum, black raspberry and jammy cherry fruit on the surprisingly dry, full-bodied frame. The supple tannins and hints of baking spices provide an impressionable finish.

In the heart of Italy lies the heart of Italian winemaking itself. Tuscany has long been considered one of the top wine producing regions of the world, and with good reason. Its



rich, fertile soils and consistent climate provides the perfect environment for many of Italy's greatest wines.

Col D'Orcia is just one of the many wonderful producers that

take full advantage of the region's bounty, making one of Italy's most revered wines: Brunello di Montalcino. Situated on the outskirts of the medieval town of Siena, the estate controls 1,300 acres of land (370 acres of vineyards), making it one of the area's largest properties. The 2004 Col d'Orcia Brunello di Montalcino (\$44) is made from 100 percent sangiovese and is the estate's flagship wine. The fragrant bouquet delivers floral notes of violets and red berries. In the mouth, the wine is full and expansive, with dominant flavors of black cherry, smoked meats and ripe red plum. Smooth tannins add balance and depth and contribute to the long and elegant finish.

Jumping down the leg of Italy toward Naples is the tiny village of Sorbo Serpic in Campania's Irpinia region, where the relatively new wine estate of Feudi di San Gregorino is located. Founded in 1986, the estate takes pride in breathing new life into indigenous varieties such as fiano di avellino, greco tufo and aglianico. The vineyards are blessed with deposits of volcanic ash, sandstone and marl in the soil — thanks to nearby Mount Vesuvius — which lends a distinctive mineral aroma to the wines. The 2008 Feudi di San Gregorino Greco di Tufo (\$17) features the aforementioned minerally nose along with scents of ripe apple and pear. The mouth is rewarded with well-balanced flavors of apple, apricot and pineapple on the front of the tongue and hints of mint and mineral on the bright, engaging finish.