



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Quanta Robinson is the executive chef at Black's Bar & Kitchen in Bethesda.

A kitchen of her own

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, executive chef Quanta Robinson at Black's Bar & Kitchen in Bethesda portrays the quintessential low-key boss, surely unflappable in the face of any kitchen dilemma. Considering she just turned 31, that says a lot for a young woman who has worked her way from grill cook to the top in a very competitive field.

A Prince George's County native, Robinson attended Laurel High School before heading to the Culinary Arts Program offered at the Art Institute of Philadelphia. Upon returning to the metro area, Robinson was hired by another local restaurant group before she heard about the opening at the Black Restaurant Group: a position in the new restaurant, BlackSalt. Applying for, and getting, the job, as a line cook to work under executive chef Jeff Black, Robinson found herself on an inner track in her culinary career.

It's a fitting job path for her: Robinson said she had always dreamed of becoming a chef, even as a little girl.

"Cooking was a big deal for me," she said. "My sister and me always helped out, but my sister can't cook. I was always into watching cooking shows, like Julia Child, 'Yan Can Cook' and 'The Frugal Gourmet.' I couldn't not watch them."

Although she said the only cookbooks she read were the Betty Crocker books her mom owned, Robinson became inspired to turn her childhood cooking interest into a lifelong passion. For one thing, she said, taking simple ingredients and turning them into an appealing meal intrigued her.

"That always amazed me," she said. "I decided I wanted to do that and to

What's your comfort food?

I lean to Italian pasta and cream. Lasagna is definitely a comfort food. But some days when I want to get comfy, I go to eat Vietnamese pho. Aromatic foods do that and are definitely warming.

What is your cooking philosophy?

As a chef, if I'm not preparing food, I want to maintain a respectful kitchen with good vibes. Angry cooks serve angry food. When a kitchen is not in harmony, not respectful, that shows up in the cooking.

What is your favorite cuisine?

learn more about what else one can do with food."

Even in high school, she said, her yearbook quotes read, "I want to be a chef. I love food, and I want to cook forever."

Well on her way to claiming an established role in the culinary field, Robinson describes her cooking style as "homey," with the goal of making people feel satisfied even if the plate is not empty.

"I want my cooking to touch people," she said. "The newer styles of cooking, there's kind of a disconnect. I don't want to feel full after every meal, but I also don't want to feel impressed by talent. ... That's doing a guest a disservice."

Robinson conceded her approach to cooking has evolved over time, and that it can change annually.

"I felt like when I was first a cook, I was just motivated to learn and to earn," she said. "But when I got higher up the ladder, I now approach every dish with this thought: What would I think if someone put this in front of me?"

I like sushi, but it depends on the mood. It makes me feel clean. A good steak I would take any day.

Which chef has inspired you the most?

Julia Child. She was really inspirational to me. Being a woman is not as easy as you think. People think of women as a cook, men as a chef.

What's in your fridge?

A ton of Lunchables, food for my daughter. Baked chicken. I usually make food for the family and freeze it. Juice, milk, lots of liquids.

IF YOU GO Black's Bar & Kitchen

» **Where:** 7750 Woodmont Ave., Bethesda

» **Info:** 301-652-5525

» **Hours:** Lunch — 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday, noon to 3 p.m. Saturday; Dinner — 5:30 to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 5:30 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Sunday; Brunch — 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Sunday

She also readily acknowledged she has not reached the point in her career when she can claim a signature dish.

"Once the dish is gone, it's gone," she said. "I move on to the next."

And what about her noncooking sister these days?

Well, Robinson said, she grew up to be a lawyer, but she has become more of a foodie now that her sister Quanta is a chef.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Portugal is much more than port

Since the mid-18th century, Portugal's wine reputation has been mainly built around port, the classic fortified wine made exclusively in the Douro region, located in the northern part of the country. Yet, less than half of the approximately 185 million gallons of wine produced each year is dedicated to these sweet wines. It turns out Portugal, now the seventh-largest wine-producing country in the world, has a lot more to offer than just port.

Located in the western portion of Europe, Portugal is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and south and by Spain to the north and east. It is a country of diverse climatic conditions with at least six distinctive wine appellations that stretch from the cooler regions of Vinho Verde in the north, to the Lagos region deep in the south.

One of the largest wine-growing regions — taking up one-third of the country — is the sun-drenched rolling hills of Alentejo, located in the southern half of the country. Often referred to as the "breadbasket of Portugal," the warm-to-hot climate was, until recently, better suited for cereal grains and olive and oak cork trees than for fine wine production. But thanks to investments in wine-making equipment and techniques, as well as modern irrigation methods, the quality of both white and red wines from the region have dramatically improved.

While the white grape varieties, including antao vaz, arinto, manteudo and perrum, are gaining popularity for their tropical and stone fruit characteristics, it is clearly the traditional Portuguese red wines, such as alfrocheiro, alicante bouschet and touriga nacional, that are in high demand. In addition, Old World grapes, such as syrah, cabernet sauvignon and petite verdot, are being cultivated for single varietal production as well as for "Super Alentejo" red blends.

The Alentejo consists of eight geographically diverse subappellations, each with its own Denominacion de Origen Calificada (DOC), including coastal, plains and mountainous growing regions. The best-known regions are Borba, where limestone soils favor bright, citrus-focused white wines, and Evora, whose ancient historical sites and luscious red wines makes it a popular tourist destination. Other appellations include Granja-Amareleja, Moura, Portalegre, Redondo, Reguengos and Vidigueira.

At a recent tasting, sponsored jointly by the

Portuguese Embassy and the Wines of Alentejo association, I was able to take a tasting tour of this up-and-coming appellation. Retail prices are approximate.

Starting off in the Vidigueira sub-region, the **2009 Paulo Laureano Branco (\$18)** is made from the white grape varietal antao vaz and possesses a wonderful floral nose of tropical fruits, nectarine, minerals and a touch of vanilla. The flavors are very well balanced in the mouth with notes of tropical fruit up front and just a touch of banana on the pretty finish.

Another remarkable white wine is the **2008 Esporao Reserva Branco (\$18)**. This charming blend of antao vaz, arinto and roupeiro grapes is very reminiscent of a white Rhone varietal blend, sporting a floral nose of stone fruit and acacia flowers. The unctuous body displays subtle flavors of apple, papaya and toasty oak on the front of the palate while hints of vanilla round out the lush finish.

One of the best values in red wine from the Borba appellation is the **2007 Marques De Borba Red Wine** by Ramos Vinhos. For \$14, you get a wine made from trincadeira, aragones, alicante bouschet and cabernet sauvignon grapes that are picked by hand, crushed partially by foot and then aged for five months in French oak barrels. The nose is perfumed with strawberry and cherry blossom aromas. This medium-bodied frame carries warm flavors of red berry fruit with a round textured mouthfeel leading to a soft, lingering finish.

Now I know that you are not supposed to buy a book by its cover or a wine by its label, but I love the label on the **2007 Malhadinha Nova Monte Da**

Pecaguina Red Wine (\$35), whose cartoon dragonfly was drawn by the young daughter of the owners. The wine is made from a blend of aragones, alicante bouschet, touriga nacional, syrah and alfrocheiro. It possesses an intense aroma of black fruit, baking spices and minerals.

The flavors are deep and concentrated, with ripe strawberries and cherries coming through on the front of the palate. Notes of tobacco add depth on the long, persistent finish.

Heading up a notch in price — \$40 — and in satisfaction is the **2005 Dona Maria Red Wine Reserva**. Made from a blend of alicante bouschet, petite verdot and syrah and aged for one year in French oak barrels, this wine explodes with aromas of dark fruit, mint and spices. Rich, layered flavors of black plums, dark cherry and spices fill out the palate while hints of tobacco lead to a silky-but-powerful finish.

