



ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Bobby Varua is the force behind DCDE Hospitality Group, which manages Mad Hatter, Front Page, Starboard and Bethany Blues.

Working hard, playing hard

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

If you were to bump into Bobby Varua, corporate executive chef of DCDE Hospitality Group, on a Washington sidewalk, you would find a cheerful, mild-mannered guy who is as easygoing as, say, Chicago's Rick Bayless or the Food Network's Bobby Flay. That's Varua today.

But he tells of another Varua, the hard-core workaholic from some of New York's pricier, hard-driving, superstar kitchens: China Grill, Nougatine, Aureole, Restaurant Daniel and Brasserie, to name a few. And his colleagues? Charlie Palmer, Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Daniel Boulud and David Burke, all megastars in the kitchen.

"I was as hard-working and driven as they all were," Varua said of his Manhattan days. "Ten years ago, it was all about making great food as the motivator. Now I realize I must manage and lead people well. You can get your food on the plate ... I can cook a great dish, but I can't do it all."

Why the personality and the career changes? For Varua, the answer is simple: marriage and two adorable daughters. That's the personality part. As for the career, Varua moved from the spotlight at 701 Restaurant to head up the various DCDE Hospitality Group kitchens under owner Dick Heidenberger, a local restaurateur who owns and manages the Front Page and the Mad Hatter restaurants in Washington, plus Bethany Blues and the Starboard in Delaware Beach.

"This keeps my energy going," Varua said. "It is a most rewarding job."

And with overseeing six different restaurants with four different

How do you get your inspiration?

Lately, it's been from my children. I like that they are being so simple. So simple but good, and innocent. I try to use that in my cooking. Simple things make a big difference. I have tons of cookbooks, but it's my kids.

What's in your fridge?

Lots of leftover Chinese food from the Old Shanghai Cafe in Germantown. Fish sauce. Strawberries for my daughters. Pork hocks that I boiled off at 9 a.m. I am obsessed with pigs

and fish sauce.

What is your comfort food?

Pork and chicken adobo. It has to be. I am also obsessed with Subway sandwiches or with pizzas. I can eat a whole pie during the day.

Which are your favorite restaurants?

2941, Hook, Mad Hatter for comfort food.

Which is your favorite cuisine?

Filipino. The amount of white rice I eat is ridiculous.

IF YOU GO DCDE Hospitality Group

- » **Where:** The Mad Hatter, Front Page, The Starboard and Bethany Blues Restaurants
- » **Hours:** 11 a.m. to midnight, daily

food concepts, the job keeps Varua on his toes.

"Now I do a whole range of genres," he said.

"So doing the different concepts is very creative," he said. The concepts range from comfort food like braised lamb shanks to avante garde plating with Varua-made duck prosciutto.

Varua's love for the kitchen began early in life, and he attributes this culinary passion to his father, who cooked every night, every day. His dad even went so far as to dry fish and squid on old window screens hanging on the family balcony in their New York City apartment.

"I tried to help him out in the

kitchen," Varua said. "He was very strict with me if I messed up."

Despite this early love for cooking, Varua almost entered a career in criminal justice. His moment of truth came the day the postman delivered two applications, one for a New York police station and one to the New York Restaurant School. What would it be, cop or cook? Obviously, food won out, and Varua points out that for him, cooking is the "truest form of celebration."

Spurred on by paternal guidance, Varua eventually developed his own distinctive, whimsical style, which today reflects his Filipino heritage: Coconut-lemongrass braised oxtail with buttered sea urchin and verjus. "This is a spin on 'surf and turf,'" which in Filipino would be called 'kare-kare,' Varua said.

But again, the greatest change in his life came from the lessons he's learned. Now he can work hard and play hard with his family.

"I have really started to breathe again," he says. "I enjoy cooking and I enjoy my kids. I enjoy life. When I work hard, I make sure the guests are loving the food."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Wines of the Union des Grand Cru

Professional golfers have the PGA. Actors have the Screen Actors Guild. And the top estates of the famed wine-growing region of Bordeaux have the Union des Grand Cru (UGC), an organization of 132 member chateaux, who banded together in 1973 to protect their unique heritage and promote their wines around the world.

The UGC comprises estates from the most well-known and respected appellations in Bordeaux including Pauillac, Saint-Julien, Saint-Estephe, Saint-Emilion, Pomerol, Medoc, Margaux, Graves, Sauternes and Pessac-Leognan. While many of the UGC member estates are "classified" growths, including all five "first" growth wines, most are not. The notion of a classified growth wine stems from an archaic system of ranking many of the region's estates.

Growth "classification" was initially developed in 1855 as part of the historical Exposition Universelle de Paris by Emperor Napoleon III, who insisted on inventing a rating system for the best wines of Bordeaux. The result was the Official Classification of 1855, a part political/part merit-based cataloging system which tiered the top chateaux of the Medoc into five distinct "growths" (First, Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth crus). Of the entire 61 classified Chateaux, all but one came from the Medoc region.

With the exception of Chateau Haut-Brion, from the Graves appellation, the classification did not include producers from the regions of Graves, Saint-Emilion or Pomerol. The original list remained unchanged until 1973, when Chateau Mouton Rothschild was promoted to First Growth Cru status following decades of lobbying by owner Baron Philippe de Rothschild. In addition, both Graves and Saint-Emilion have since created their own classification system, however Pomerol refuses to establish any type of ranking for their estates.

Today, so many Bordeaux estates, regardless of classification, are producing such superb wines that it leads one to believe that the classification system is mostly a sentimental ideology. Enter the Union des Grand Cru, a program that encompasses a collection of wineries — classified or not — who share a common quality requirement from estates located in the Gironde, Medoc, Graves and Pessac Leognan, Saint Emilion, Pomerol, Sauternes and Barsac.

Members sponsor an annual tasting of the latest vintage for trade professionals and members of the wine media in Bordeaux. In addition, winery representatives of the UGC travel to major cities around the world in order to provide consumers with the opportunity to meet winemakers from Bordeaux

and taste wines from various vintages.

Recently, representatives of the UGC traveled to Washington to help the French-American Cultural Foundation celebrate the 25th anniversary of France Magazine. Here are some highlights from the tasting. All wines are from Bordeaux, France. Retail prices are approximate.

2003 Rauzan Segla, Margaux (\$40) — A very nice wine, displaying classic aromas of cedar, crème de cassis, and spice on the earthy nose. It is medium-bodied, with pure, ripe dark fruit and a long, impressive finish.

2004 Lagrange, Saint-Julien (\$43) — Fragrant aromatics of ripe cherry, cassis and earth lead to a well-balanced, supple mouthfeel featuring flavors of dried cherry, crème de cassis and black plum. The combination of soft tannins and remarkable ripeness result in a smooth texture up front and a lush finish.

2002 Calon Segur, Saint-Estephe (\$60)

— There is something remarkably charming about this wine. From the sweet bouquet of black cherries and toasted cedar on the nose to the flavors of dark plums, cassis and licorice in the mouth, it feels downright soothing. Notes of dried herbs and supple tannins on the elegant finish complete the picture.

2001 Lynch Bages (Pauillac, \$85) — This sentimental favorite exhibits a classic Pauillac nose of black currants and mineral scents. The full-bodied style easily supports the concentrated flavors of sweet black cherry, cassis and toasted oak across the palate. The balance between fruit, tannins and acid is near pitch perfect on the long, masculine finish.

2003 Pichon-Longueville Comtesse de Lalande, Pauillac (\$125) — This is a fantastic example of the region, with wonderfully concentrated flavors of black fruit, cassis, cocoa and roasted espresso falling over the tongue in waves. Hints of toasted oak are carried by chewy tannins along the opulent, full-bodied finish.

2001 Margaux, Margaux (\$300+) — One of the original four First Growth wines from the 1855 classification, the elegant mouthfeel strikes an ideal balance between the flavors of dark plum, black olives, cassis and cedar, and the copious sweet tannins that support the flavors upfront and throughout the amazingly graceful finish, with concentration, poise and depth.

2001 Chateau d'Yquem, Sauternes (\$600) — This sweet dessert wine is perfect in every way. From the aromatic nose of honeysuckle and orange rind to the unctuous flavors of coconut, orange marmalade, pineapple and Apple Brown Betty, this wine sings in the mouth. The go-on-forever finish is supported by bracing acidity and abundant fruit. It is, admittedly, an extravagant treat.

