



PHOTOS BY ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

The head chef at Whitlow's on Wilson, Diane Pierrelus, learned much of her culinary skill from her grandmother.

Classic kitchen comforts

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Despite her French last name, Diane Pierrelus, the executive chef of Arlington's comfort-food destination, Whitlow's on Wilson, is a homegrown lady who has cooked around D.C. for several years.

She has the casual air of a home cook but the inherent skills and gravity of the classically trained. Without a culinary degree in hand, one wonders how did Pierrelus gain such skills.

According to her, it goes back to her grandmother, who lived with and cooked for Pierrelus and her family in the days when Washington was a much smaller, more intimate town. The family lived in Georgetown, in a small house behind the now-closed Columbia Hospital for Women.

"My grandmother was old school," says Pierrelus. "She baked pies and bread in a potbelly stove. We had chickens in the backyard, and every Sunday we had big Sunday dinners, and everyone came to our house."

Tasked with helping her grandmother with kitchen duties, even cleaning chitterlings and collard green when she was only 5 or 6 years old, Pierrelus got an early start in her culinary training. She took her first restaurant job when she was only 15, making sandwiches at Gino's for several years before moving on to work at Jenkin's Hill and the now-defunct Yolanda's on Capitol Hill. Then she moved on to cook at the French restaurant Quigley's because she wanted to learn a whole range of cooking styles. "I wanted to know not only American, but German, French, and Italian," she says. "People [after tasting my

What is your comfort food?
Shrimp cooked with butter, white wine, and garlic. Just something simple, like a salad with all the fresh vegetables. When I get here, I go crazy.

What are your essential ingredients?
Burgers, steaks, chicken. Old Bay Seasoning; fresh herbs such as sage, basil, oregano, and thyme; fresh garlic; fresh fruit.

What has been your luckiest moment?

Landing this job at Whitlow's on Wilson. And maybe I will have my own little place ... Diane's Diner, for breakfast and lunch.

What is your favorite cuisine?
African-American with collards, mac 'n' cheese, chitterlings. And Italian because I like the sauces, and I like fritto misto.

What's in your fridge?
Orange juice, shredded cheese, chicken, eggs, milk, tomatoes and iceberg lettuce.



IF YOU GO Whitlow's on Wilson

» **Where:** 2854 Wilson Blvd., Arlington
» **Info:** 703-276-9693
» **Hours:** 11 a.m. to 2 a.m., Mon. through Fri.; 9 a.m. to 2 a.m. Sat. and Sun.

food] used to think I was from Italy. I made my own pastas."

She finally landed her present job at Whitlow's about 15 years ago, where she has comfortably ruled a kitchen that produces food marked with her very personal interpretation of old-fashioned American cooking. As she describes it, her cooking is just basic American food.

"It's collard greens, ribs, mac 'n' cheese, crab cakes," she says. "My crab cakes are the best in Arlington. I have people who come from the Outer Banks just to eat them. I also have a secret recipe for barbecued ham roast, which I usually serve once a month." Other public favorites are the shrimp and grits and daily roast turkey and corned beef, all done from scratch. "Nothing is processed," she says. "It's all fresh."

For this self-taught cook, perhaps the most cherished feature of her work at Whitlow's is its family atmosphere. "It a big, happy family here," she says, mentioning too that most of her relatives have, at one point, worked at Whitlow's or in other local restaurant businesses. Indeed, her son cooks part-time in the kitchen, and mother and son often have cook-offs.

So after working long hours in this cheerful setting, does Pierrelus run home to cook? Not at all, she says. "I have the cleanest kitchen in the block," she says. "But if I do cook at home, it is simple, like roast chicken and a salad."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

More value from Portugal: tawny port

Last week, I wrote about wines from Portugal, but not the typical port wines usually associated with the European county. Rather, I introduced the remarkable wine values being produced in and around the capital city of Lisbon. However, as one reader recently pointed out, Lisbon is not the only region with a corner on the value market. There are many good buys to be had on the port-side of Portugal, namely tawny port.

Port wine starts off as traditional red wine, but the fermentation process is interrupted by the addition of a distilled grape spirit known as aguardente. This process results in higher residual sugar and higher alcohol content. The Douro region, where the port grape varieties are grown, hugs the formidable Serra do Marao mountain range. The rough rocky terrain provides plenty of stress for the grape vines, forcing more flavor into the fruit, of the three major grape varieties: Tinta Roriz, Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca.

The four most popular types of port wines, in general order of price, are vintage ports, late bottled vintage ports, ports with indication of age and tawny ports. All styles of port are crafted using a blend of the aforementioned varieties, as well as other lesser known grapes, which allows each house to create a particular style that is consistent from year to year.

Tawny ports are the best example of this blending technique. They are aged in large wooden barrels, called pipes. As wine evaporates from the barrel, port wine from the next oldest barrel is used to top off the pipe. As each container is filled, the next oldest container in line is used. This procedure is repeated until the end of the designated aging process is completed. This method allows wines from different vintages to be blended together. During the process, the wine experiences a subtle exposure to air, which mellows the wine, while the aging in wood departs a nutty characteristic to the wine.

Typical tawny ports spend at least two years in barrels and are either sweet or medium dry. They make a nice aperitif on a cold night and pair well with most chocolate-based — and some fruit-centric — desserts. Best of all, they are ready to enjoy within a year or two of purchase. Retail prices are approximate.

As tawny ports go, the nonvintage Taylor Fladgate Special Tawny (\$14) is special. It has a reddish-amber color typical of older ports. The medium-bodied frame supports sweet flavors of cherry jam, roasted apricot and black plums. The clean finish features baking spices and clove.

Fonseca is a leader in aged vintage port wines, but its nonvintage Fonseca Tawny Port (\$13) is worthy of attention on its own. It sports an aromatic nose, featuring bright cherry notes that leads to flavors of coffee-toffee, red cherry and cola syrup on a silky smooth textured body. The long, pleasant finish is well worth the price alone.

One of my favorite tawnies is the nonvintage Sandeman Tawny Port (\$15). The integrated flavors of caramel, toffee and jammy black plum meld beautifully with the toasty finish. For a treat, chill it down and serve it with apple pie.

Moving up into the world of aged tawny port brings us to the Warre Tawny Port 10-Year-Old "Otima" (\$22). The number of years on the label represents the average age that the wine spent in wood. This version supplies plenty of layered flavor on the full-bodied frame, with notes of dried mango, caramel and roasted coffee on the front of the palate and hints of cocoa on the smooth, elegant finish.

Another quality aged tawny to hunt down is the Croft 10-Year-Old Tawny Port (\$23). The complex bouquet is filled with scents of jammy black fruit and melted licorice. Flavors of ripe black cherries on the front of the tongue give way to toffee and butterscotch notes on the velvety, long finish. Perfect paired with chocolate.

