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ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

# Mediterranean flair on D.C. tables

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Smiling wistfully as he talks about his homeland, Jordan, Abdul Hash Housh, the executive chef of the exotic Neyla restaurant in Georgetown, talks about his years growing up at his mother's side in the kitchen. A Lebanese transplant, for Hash Housh's mom, her kitchen was her life.

"She helped out my dad, who was also a chef," said Hash Housh. "I started work when I was very young, only 9 years old. I was helping in my mom's kitchen. It's something I love." By the time he was 15, he was an army cook. Soon after, Hash Housh worked as a line cook in the Sheraton Hotel in Baghdad, where he also was in charge of the prep kitchen. From there, the young man moved to Dubai, filled with the passion for the kitchen. "I love [cooking]," he says. "It was a good career choice."

When Hash Housh moved to the United States about 10 years ago, he landed a job with Jose Andres, helping open Andres' iconic Zaytinya, D.C.'s go-to restaurant for Mediterranean fare. "I made everything from scratch, even the phyllo dough," he recalled, a thin-as-tissue-paper pastry that defines Hash Housh's attention to detail and his reverence for traditional cooking techniques.

- What is your comfort food?**  
Soup ... a lot of warm dishes. Lentil soup.
- Where is your favorite place in the world?**  
Washington, D.C. That's why I am here for 12 years and I don't want to move. It's the heart of the world. It's almost like a village. You never feel alone here.

**IF YOU GO**  
**Neyla**  
» **Where:** 3206 N St., NW  
» **Info:** 202-333-6353  
» **Hours:** 5 to 10:30 p.m. Sunday to Thursday; 5 to 11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday

"[Andres] was crazy about my scratch cooking," he says. During his tenure at Zaytinya, he explained, Andres showed Hash Housh how to refine his Mediterranean cooking, and, in exchange, Hash Housh shared his knowledge of Middle Eastern cuisine.

Now at Neyla for the past five years, Hash Housh insists that he incorporate only traditional recipes into the menu. "It's all

**Which is your favorite cuisine?**  
Food has no nationality. I love everything like filet mignon, Indian and Asian spices. All food is the same for me.

**What is your signature dish?**  
Lamb. It is my favorite thing to make.

**Which are your favorite restaurants?**  
Cafe Atlantico and Jaleo.

good food," he says. "I believe in healthy cooking, and nothing in excess. Quality and flavor are more important than killing flavors with spices." Hash Housh describes his cooking as Middle Eastern with a European touch. "I am very fussy with vendors, and I will turn back seafood and produce that are not perfect."

This approach harkens back to what he learned from his dad years ago. "He made a lot from scratch," he says of his father. "He was very famous back home. My dad's country, Lebanon, is very famous for its food."

But Hash Housh recognizes his mom's influence, which shaped who he is today. "What drove me was what my mom taught me," he says. "I never went to culinary school. ... My mom knew that this was my life, and she was very happy with that."

# The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Super wine pairings for the Super Bowl

**M**ake no mistake — I really like beer. And I know that the party beverage of choice for the majority of Super Bowl get-togethers is usually reserved for the realm of finely crafted brews. After all, just look at all of the money mega-brewers spend on advertising during the big game and you get a sense that they know the day belongs to them. But this year, you can break out of the routine game plan and pair your Super Bowl treats with some super wines for a more upscale affair.

In our house, we rarely need an excuse to reach for the cork-screw over the bottle opener, but when the cooking is elevated from chow to cuisine, the decision is a no-brainer. Wine will win the day every time. But what wine we select is always predicated on the menu we're preparing. This Super Bowl, we're taking a page out of Food Network's playbook ([foodnetwork.com/big-game/package/index.html](http://foodnetwork.com/big-game/package/index.html)) and preparing some delectable bites to enjoy with wines between downs. Of course, we'll take a time-out during commercial breaks to enjoy the beer commercials. Retail prices are approximate.

We're kicking off our Super Bowl with a super bowl of guacamole. Yes, you can pair wine with this popular dip. While the avocado provides richness and the spices add heat, it's the acidity from the lime juice that I want to play off of. While the crisp acidity found in sauvignon blanc would make it a good choice, I think the addition of palate-cleansing bubbles is the way to go. So the wine I want to dip my chips with is the non-vintage **Segura Viudas Cava Brut Reserva Heredad, Spain (\$23)**. Its bubbles shout "party" and spread lively notes of fresh pineapple, roasted nuts and ripe pear flavor over the whole tongue. And the bubbles keep the palate fresh and ready for the next scoop of guacamole.

If your plans include rooting for the Green Bay Packers, then show your pride by serving Wisconsin bratwurst. I like the idea of going back to

the sausage's German roots with the **2009 Leonard Kreuzsch Auslese Riesling, Mosel Saar Ruwer, Germany (\$14)**. This late-harvest white wine offers just a touch of sweetness on the frame, which supports ripe flavors of white peach, nectarine and Casaba melon in the mouth.

Of course, we are equal-opportunity hosts, so we'll also serve Pittsburgh (a la Philly) steak and cheese sliders. The beef, creamy cheese and sauteed onions will line up beautifully with the aptly named **2007 Sledgehammer Cabernet Sauvignon, North Coast, Calif. (\$15)**. The fruit is harvested from a variety of vineyards in order to produce a wine that is bursting with aromas of cherry cola and pumpkin spices on the nose, and rich flavors of blackberry, cassis and dark plum on the palate. Notes of vanilla and toasty oak glide in on the supple, long finish.

My favorite game-day fare is definitely baby back ribs, and the recipe I plan to use will incorporate a touch of heat in the rub, so I will need a wine that can stand up to the challenge. The **2008 Dry Creek Vineyards "Heritage Zinfandel, Sonoma, Calif. (\$18)** will tackle the task with loads of juicy red berry fruit, blueberry jam and warm vanilla flavors. Hints of pepper on the medium-bodied finish make the wine a great team player with other spicy cuisines.

For those in the crowd who are pining away for the next season and Washington Redskins success, we plan on serving our version of red potato skins with Washington state red wine. The combination of bacon and rich cheese is just begging for syrah's number to be called. The **2006 Houge "Genesis" Syrah Columbia Valley, Washington (\$17)**, gets the nod for this play. Made from fruit sourced throughout the Columbia Valley, the wine has nice depth and balance in the mouth, featuring smoldering flavors of ripe blackberry, black cherry and black pepper on the front of the tongue, and hints of smoked meats and dried herbs on the plush finish. Touch-down.

