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ANDREW HARNIK/EXAMINER

Musseling his way to the top

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

If they are foodies at heart, most D.C. residents will know about executive chef extraordinaire Robert Wiedmaier. Extraordinary because his cooking is superb, and he has won awards, appeared at the James Beard House and runs four highly successful restaurants in the metro area: Marcel's and Brasserie Beck in D.C., Brabo by Robert Wiedmaier in Alexandria, and the Mussel Bar in Bethesda.

How does he manage them all? One answer: "I have a very fast car. Or my motorbike."

It also helps that Wiedmaier is a classically trained chef, modeled in the European tradition. Born in Germany to a Belgian father and an American mother, he grew up in Europe, attended the Culinary School of Horca in the Netherlands and then trained with some of Europe's finest chefs. After moving to the area, his rigorous training continued with stints at the now-closed Le Pavillion, then at the Four Seasons, and finally, at the Watergate, where he replaced a D.C. culinary legend, the late Jean-Louis Palladin.

The next step: opening his own restaurant in 1999. Naming it Marcel's (after his first son), Wiedmaier created a culinary stir in the capital with his deliberately elegant Belgian/European array of food — roasted diver's scallops and the Belgian classic carbonnade a la flamande have been menu stars.

Wiedmaier had bigger restaurant plans brewing. Next in his roster came Brasserie Beck, whose ongoing popularity is underscored by the fact that crowds gather nightly to unwind. A casual place to go drink Belgian beer, Beck, named after his second son, mirrors the Belgian brasserie experience, down to the overhead clocks and open kitchen. "In Belgium," he said, "brasseries are usually in train stations."

What is your signature dish?

I am best known for being a saucier and for cooking wild game, such as venison, duck, geese. I love cooking that type of food. We bring in whole hogs, and use extractions for getting flavors out of whole animals. I am a full-circle chef; I pay total respect to that animal by using the whole carcass.

What's in your fridge right now?

Eggs and a lot of hummus, avocado, chicken, olive oil, artichokes, eggplant.

What has been the greatest influence on your cooking?

One of the guys I worked for for a long time, who taught me a lot about cooking, is Douglas McNeill of the Four Seasons Hotel. ... He helped me when I opened Marcel's. He was the chef's chef. ... I had worked for great chefs in Belgium, and

Jean-Louis Palladin with his products, cooking. And Michel Richard [of Citronelle and Central]. We are good friends and we talk about food all the time.

What is your favorite dish/comfort food?

Pork belly, I love pork belly, I can eat that stuff all day long with caramelized onions and poached egg with a nice baguette with garlic and olive oil. Farm-fresh eggs with deep-orange yolk, little bit of salt; that's good eating.

Where do you eat out?

If in Bethesda, I go with the boys [sons Marcel and Beck] to Black's restaurant — their boys are my sons' best friends — and I like [Jeff Black's] restaurant. I eat at all my friends' restaurants: Scott Drewno, Michel Richard. It depends on my mood.

through the restaurant."

Most recently, Wiedmaier opened what many may think of as his most inventive eatery yet — Mussel Bar. People can drink Belgian beer, eat pizza and enjoy mussels served nine different ways, including a Thai version with a fiery broth.

With so many demands on his time, Wiedmaier does still cook nightly at Marcel's, his first and finest eatery, where he arrives between 4 and 5 p.m. to do the mise en place. He visits his other restaurants earlier in the day.

He attributes his success to his staff, who understand his philosophy and way of doing business. Fortunately for D.C. foodies, Wiedmaier has no plans to take his show on the road.

"If I stay local, I feel good," he says. "But if I had to jump on a plane to Las Vegas, I wouldn't like that."

IF YOU GO Brasserie Beck

- » **Where:** 1101 K St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-408-1717
- » **Hours:** 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. Friday, 5 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Saturday, 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday

In cooperation with the Kimpton Hotel Group in 2008, he opened his first Virginia restaurant, Brabo by Robert Wiedmaier, which he describes as between Brasserie Beck and Marcel's in price and concept. "Brabo is named after a fictional legend in Antwerp where my dad was born," he explained. "So I have the whole Belgian theme running

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

A grenache with panache

The weather in the Washington area just can't seem to make up its mind. One week it warms up to the mid-60s, but the next week it plunges right back down. What wine do you drink when the weather has more mood swings than a teenager? Some red wines can be too big for the warmer days and some white wines can be too thin for colder nights.

Enter grenache, a red grape known more for its supporting role in French Chateaufeuf du Pape wines than as the lovely little star of the show it can be. And it is the perfect transitional wine, like Goldilocks' last bowl of oatmeal — it's not too big, it's not too little, it's just right.

Surprisingly, grenache is one of the most widely planted grape varieties in the world. It is generally spicy, with accents on soft red and black berry flavors and, thanks to mild tannins, has a softer mouthfeel on the palate.

In France, it is usually the dominant grape when blended with other Rhone Valley varieties such as syrah, mourvedre and cinsaut. It is also found in many rose wines in southern France and parts of Spain. It has gained huge popularity in Australia where its softer fruit qualities are used in "GSM" blends with syrah and mourvedre.

I grew up in Central California, where grenache was planted throughout the San Joaquin Valley where it was mainly used as a blending component for jug wines. In the mid-1980s, it became the little darling of the Rhone Rangers movement in central California where it first gained a cult following and then later, much-deserved commercial success. Today, it can also be found thriving in Napa Valley as well as southern Oregon and parts of Washington state.

Here are a few of my favorite grenache wines to enjoy during the next few winter/spring weather weeks — and beyond. Retail prices are approximate.

From the Languedoc region of France comes the delicious **2007 Domaine Cabirau Grenache Serge and Tony (\$16)**, made from a small vineyard owned by importer Dan Kravitz and named in honor of the two gentlemen who oversee the vines and winemaking. Boasting an aromatic bouquet of black fruit and violets on the nose and flavors of ripe black raspberry and smoked meat on the front of the tongue, this wine is both bright and complex at the same time.

Australian winemakers love playing around with grenache and I think the **2008 Trevor Jones Boots Grenache (\$15)**, from the Barossa

Valley, is a very successful experiment. It shows off wonderful aromas of black cherry and blueberry jam followed up by luscious flavors of kirsch, licorice and spice on a medium-bodied frame. The fruit-driven finish is round and expansive.

One of my favorite Spanish wines in the under \$20 category is the **2008 QUO Grenache Old Vines (\$15)**, from the Aragon region. This lovely wine displays aromas of cherry and strawberry on the bouquet and lush, silky flavors of raspberry, strawberry and jammy red berry that keep building and deepening through the finish.

Available directly from the winery in Yakima, Wash., is the highly regarded **2008 McCrea Cellars Grenache (\$28)**. It blends in touches of syrah, counoise, cinsaut and mourvedre for a wine exudes scents of cherries, dried herbs and forest floor on the bouquet and flavors of black cherry, red plums and blueberry on the expansive palate.

If you really want to splurge on a special wine, then try to get your hands on a bottle of **2008 Tablas Creek Grenache (\$35)** from the Paso Robles region of California. It has a complex palate of sweet and sour cherries, strawberry jam, cigar box and bramble. The finish is flashy, with notes of dried herbs and black pepper; supported by a round, lush texture.



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