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"By the age of 16, I knew I wanted to go to culinary school," says Pearl Dive Oyster Palace chef Danny Wells.

## Danny Wells: One fish, two fish

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Takoma Park native Danny Wells knows a thing or two about fish. As chef de cuisine in restaurant owner Jeff Black's new Pearl Dive Oyster Palace, Wells has earned his place in this fish-oriented kitchen: He has worked at Black's high-end seafood restaurant, BlackSalt, in D.C. for several years.

"I opened there as sous chef for three years," said Wells of his time at BlackSalt. "Then I worked as chef de cuisine until 2010, when I took a break and moved to New York to cook at the Mandarin Oriental hotel's restaurant Asiate." But Wells knew that the Pearl Dive project was coming together, and returned to D.C. to be onsite for concept and construction meetings to execute the menus for the opening.

Wells grew up in a household where good, home-made food was valued. As he notes, his mother and paternal grandmother were really good cooks. "We had no frozen foods and rarely ate canned vegetables," he explained. "There was always an appreciation for good ingredients."

As a young teen, Wells took his first job as a dishwasher in a Takoma Park eatery, but early on was allowed to work with the chef and pastry chef to do some prep work. "While working there, the more I did the more I enjoyed it," he said. "By the age of 16, I knew I wanted to go to culinary school." And he did, attending Johnson & Wales at the

### What is your comfort food?

Vietnamese pho from Pho 75 [in Arlington]. ... And I eat at 2 Amys a lot.

### What's in your fridge?

Not a lot. When I have more than two days off, I stock the fridge at home. ... I make broths and freeze them.

### Where's your favorite restaurant?

In Silver Spring, there's a Thai

restaurant called Kao Thai. And Pacci's Trattoria, Mark's Kitchen, Palena and Jackie's Restaurant.

### What would you do with a year off?

Travel ... Brazil is at the top of my list.

### Do you have a favorite cookbook?

I use "Culinary Artistry." It provides information about [food] pairings.

### IF YOU GO Pearl Dive Oyster Palace

» **Where:** 1612 14th St. NW

» **Info:** 202-986-8778

» **Hours:** Lunch, 11:30 to 3 p.m. Friday and Saturday; dinner, 5 to 11 p.m. nightly

Providence, R.I., campus.

Afterward, he moved around a bit, from Miami Beach and to Spain. But he ran into a friend who was cooking at that time at Black's Rockville restaurant, Addie's. He came back to work as a line cook there, and, after an interval, ended up working at BlackSalt.

Fortunately, Wells loves seafood, because he is surrounded with every sort of deep-sea matter afloat, from mermaid designs to portholes to fish

to loads of oysters themselves. "I love eating it [seafood]," he said. "I grew up eating a lot of fish. I went fishing with my dad, and we especially caught crabs in this area. I also had a brief obsession with Mediterranean cooking so I developed an appreciation for it." He added that working with Jeff Black, now an acknowledged seafood expert, has only heightened his hankering for all edibles from the deep.

Has he achieved a seafood signature dish? All varieties of seafood are challenging to cook, he says, because their flesh is generally fragile, leaving little room for error. In the end, he decides that he really focuses on preparing mid-Atlantic varieties, from rockfish to bluefish to oysters. Yet, he gets a kick out of preparing tilefish from the Carolinas, the cobia from Florida, many types of tuna, and mackerel. Sounds like he learned good lessons when fishing with his dad.

The Vine Gal » **Cindy Greenberg**

## Wine book gift guide

The day after Thanksgiving can only mean two things; turkey sandwiches and the start of the holiday shopping season. Making a turkey sandwich is easy. Trying to figure out what to give the wine lover in your life takes a bit more thought.

Of course, wine is the obvious choice, but buying wine can be tricky unless you know what wine your recipient favors. And corkscrews are the proverbial neckties of the wine world.

For my money, books are the way to go. They're perfect for the novice as well as the old pro and they can be used over and over again without having to replace a single cork. Here is a collection of books that should satisfy the intellectual palate of any wine, beer and spirits lover in your life.

Develop your inner mixologist with the "Mr. Boston Official Bartender's Guide: 75th Anniversary Edition" (\$15). This compendium of drink recipes is a surefire way to expand your distilled spirits knowledge beyond martinis and gin and tonics. One clever idea is to send a few recipes to friends, and then invite them over for a spirit-of-the-week themed party. It also makes a thoughtful stocking stuffer or hostess gift.

When my husband first dove into wine, his bible was Kevin Zraly's "Windows on the World Wine Course." Today, "Kevin Zraly's Complete Wine Course: 2012 Edition" (\$28) is the new standard. Before you jump directly into his eight wine classes (not glasses), be sure to read the first chapter "Prelude to Wine" and then skip to page 249 and read "The Physiology of Tasting Wine."

The long and colorful history of the winemaking industry of Argentina is chronicled in "The Vineyard at the End of the World" (\$27) by Ian Mount. This historical accounting dates back approximately 600 years and continues through to modern times, recounting the evolution of the winemaking industry, including the integration of French and American winemakers' influences on the industry. The political climate of Argentinean history provides an interesting backdrop during the industry's developmental timeline.

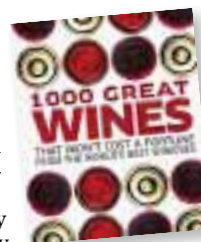
If you're looking for a good, solid reference guide, then "Beverage Basics: Understanding and Appreciating Wine, Beer, and Spirits" (\$65) by Robert W. Small and Michelle Couturier is an excellent choice. Think introductory textbook for Wine, Beer, and Spirits 101. The chapters are easy to navigate, have adequate white space for your annotations, and offer classic food pairing sug-



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gestions for each grape varietal. The appendices are particularly useful and provide a wealth of consolidated information in tables and charts for easy reference.

My favorite book this year is "1000 Great Everyday Wines From the World's Best Wineries" (\$25) by Editor in Chief Jim Gordon. It is researched and written by a group of wine writers who catalog, by country, their top value wines. For



example, one recommendation from France includes a second label wine by a renowned chateau. A recommendation from California highlights the Franco-American pairing between the Perrin's (Southern Rhone) and Haas' (Central California) Tablas Creek venture. And wines from emerging wine regions, such as Israel, are a treat to learn about.

If the current economic situation has you staying close to home this year, then pick up a copy of "Saint-Emilion: The Chateaux, Winemakers, and Landscapes of Bordeaux's Famed Wine Region" (\$55) by Beatrice Massenet, Emmanuelle Ponsandantin and Francois Querre and take a virtual trip to France's most famous wine region. Open a bottle of your favorite Bordeaux wine, curl up with this book and take a vicarious journey to 70 famed Bordeaux houses, such as Chateau Cheval Blanc and Angevulus. The accompanying interviews with the winemakers literally bring the people who make some of the greatest wines in the world right to your fingertips.