



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

District Commons chef Jeff Tunks says the eatery is really two restaurants in one: an American brasserie and a burger joint.

Jeff Tunks: D.C.'s uncommon chef

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Jeff Tunks is one D.C. chef who needs no introduction. A powerhouse in the local dining scene, Tunks — executive chef and co-owner of DC Coast, Ceiba, Acadiana and Passion-Fish — puts his culinary stamp on everything he touches, including his new venture District Commons. Not only that, this high-profile man with his many talents has won the coveted Chef of the Year award by the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington for 2003-2004.

Many D.C. foodies may think of Tunks as a New Orleans man — he was a prime mover in raising disaster-relief funds and awareness to help Louisiana locals after Hurricane Katrina — but Tunks is a Midwesterner by birth. Like many of his colleagues, he attended the Culinary Institute of America but he is different in that he graduated with top honors and received the Frances L. Roth award. From there, Tunks did his externship under Dean Ferring at the Veranda Club in Atlanta, transferring with him to the Mansion on Turtle Creek in Dallas, where Tunks worked at Mistral, a sister restaurant on the complex. Later, he moved around to other top-notch restaurants in various parts of the country. At the Grill Room at the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans, Tunks earned highest marks, Mobil 5 Stars. Working with other acclaimed chefs, Tunks began to form the foundation of his cooking credo: quality ingredients plus refined cooking skills equal primo meals.

Ending up in D.C. about 15 years ago, Tunks and partners began their local restaurant group with DC Coast. Several restaurants with very different menus later, Tunks has arrived at what may be

What is your favorite dish?

For my last meal, I would want a dry-aged prime steak, like a prime porterhouse, plus all the usual suspects, like creamed spinach and a big glass of red wine.

What is your cooking philosophy?

I am very straightforward and cook with not too much fuss. Let the ingredient speak for itself. I source the best and most seasonal ingredients, and there are no smoke and mirrors. It's just well-executed food on a plate with no hidden surprises.

What is your most important ingredient?

Salt. That separates a lot of

restaurants. The key is consistency. We work from overseeing recipes, and a salt is a big part of the overall taste. ... Salt is so important, even when blanching vegetables.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

It depends on where and with whom. Sometimes if I want a formal, blow-out meal dinner is at Marcel's. ... If I want pho, I go to Pho Today in Virginia and to Honey Pig for Korean barbecue. ... Morimoto in Philadelphia with him [Morimoto] cooking.

What's in your fridge right now?

My vice: Diet Pepsi. My virtue: 1 percent Horizon milk.

If you go District Commons

- » **Where:** 2200 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
- » **Info:** 202-587-8277
- » **Hours:** Lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; dinner, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 5:30 to 11 p.m. Friday to Saturday, 5:30 to 9 p.m. Sunday; brunch, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Sunday

his the jewel in his chef's toque: District Commons. "I wanted to do something that was new with great dynamics," he said, "and one that was chef-driven [rather than a chain]. ... We wanted a concept that would be approachable, affordable and that offered great quality."

What he has engineered in this dual concept is an American brasserie with all-American-sourced

ingredients and classic American desserts, he says, plus a burger joint with luscious shakes. "So it's two-in-one. These may be different restaurants," he explained, "but it is the same chef and the same management team."

To further underscore the uniqueness of the restaurants' dual personality, Tunks emphasizes that all elements of each menu are made from scratch. His restaurant corner in the West End has a captive audience of George Washington University students and personnel, the hospital, the International Monetary Fund and residents.

What's Tunks' next concept? He admits that right now opening these two new restaurants-in-one has been challenging. "This takes time, and I want to be here all the time," Tunks said. "I really have enjoyed my career, and it has come full circle. I started out cooking hamburgers, and it is super to watch people [at BTS] enjoy the burgers they eat ... and I now cook much better."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg Party wines for under \$20

The holiday party season is in full swing and chances are, you're either hosting a holiday party or have been invited to one. And while you certainly want to serve — or give — a wine that will be delicious, it would be nice if you didn't have to break the bank, particularly if you need more than a few bottles.

Here is a selection of wonderfully tasteful wines that cost under \$20 that you can proudly serve your guests or take along as a gift to any party. Retail prices are approximate.

Alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the **2009 Alpha Sauvignon Blanc (\$19)** from Florina, Greece, is first on my white wine list this holiday season. The nose is full of honeydew melons, lemons and limes, and the mouth is quenched by crisp, clean flavors of papaya, ripe peach, melon and grapefruit.

If you really want to make a splash at your next holiday party, try serving a **2009 Cannonball Cabernet Sauvignon (\$15)** from California. On the nose, red cherry, cocoa, and a hint of toasty oak dominate the bouquet. The balanced mouthfeel is full of bright strawberry, red cherry and ripe blueberry flavors. There is just a touch of cocoa on the soft, smooth, easy-drinking finish.

If you're looking to stump your guests with a delicious red wine, how about serving the **2010 Gran Feudo Edicion Tempranillo (\$10)** from Navarra, Spain. This wine jumps up in your mouth and shouts from start to finish. Bright red cherry, raspberry and plum flavors sit on a medium-bodied frame with great balance and structure. Abundant acidity keeps the finish fresh and lively and ready for another sip.

Whoever said that pinot noir has to be expensive to be good never tried the **2009 Pennywise Pinot Noir (\$12)** from "The Other Guys" from Napa Valley. Produced by members of the famous Sebastiani family, this ruby-tinged wine boasts aromas of cherries, strawberries and earthy floral notes. Flavors of strawberry, watermelon, red plum and blueberries swirl around in the mouth on a juicy frame. The lingering hint of cocoa on the finish adds a touch of sophistication.

If you really want to impress your guests, consider serving a grand vin de Bordeaux, specifically the **2008 Chateau Clos du Moulin (\$13)** from the Medoc appellation of Bordeaux, France. The bouquet is chock-full of dried herbs, cedar and dark currant aromas. It has good weight in the mouth that supports flavors of black currant and cherry fruit intermixed with spice box and

plums. The medium-bodied finish is supple-textured, with remarkable concentration that sports a touch of chocolate.

If you need a big red wine to get you out of the doghouse, then the **2009 Yard Dog (\$14)** from South Eastern Australia will have your guests barking for more. This masculine red is a blend of petit verdot, cabernet sauvignon and merlot and is howling good. It shows off aromas of ripe black plum, dark raspberries and red currants. The full-bodied frame supports oodles of black and red berry fruit on the front of the tongue and ends with a solid, chewy dark berry finish thanks to the rustic tannins and medium acidity.

Another juicy choice from the land down under is the **2008 Tarot Grenache (\$13)** by Alpha Box & Dice. Aromas of strawberry and dried flowers waft on the nose while notes of bright red cherry and other red berry fruit stand out on the front of the palate. The medium-bodied frame is supported by soft tannins, good acidity and features a touch of dark strawberry and spice on the supple finish.



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