



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

"When I cook these burgers," says chef Ryan Fichter, "I cook them with love. If you do something with love, it shows."

Ryan Fichter: The king of burgers

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

You have got to admit that Ryan Fichter, executive chef of Georgetown's upscale burger joint, Thunder Burger & Bar, has got it pretty good. He can create and cook up one of America's most favorite foods, and do so in a classy setting that bears no resemblance to a fast-food burger joint.

Fichter's burgers are not mere patties but are signature items — ranging from free-range beef to elk, boar, turkey, and bison to Kobe beef — and are obviously enhanced by his classic culinary training.

A Maryland native, Fichter is a Culinary Institute of America graduate. He has worked in some top-notch restaurants, including several from the local Clyde's Restaurant Group and D.C.'s Smith & Wollensky. In between these various stints, he also worked in Charlotte, N.C., with James Alexander at the Myer's Park Country Club, and, as he says, he got a taste for the country club atmosphere, gained appreciation of the Southern cooking, and walked off with a passion for Southern barbecue styles — that is, long, slow cooking.

That he has scored work in top-tier restaurants reflects his life-long passion for food and cooking. "I always wanted to be a chef," said Fichter. "I always loved cooking," noting that as a youngster, he often helped prepare family dinners with his mom and dad. More than that, the young Fichter became a fan of such celebrity

What is your comfort food?

Lasagna. I love it, love it. Then barbecued chicken, mac 'n' cheese and pizza.

What is your essential ingredient?

Salt. I love salt. Then garlic, extra virgin olive oil, and then love. That's the secret ingredient.

Which is your favorite restaurant?

Clyde's, any of them. I also [like] Il Canale pizza. There are really

a lot of good restaurants.

What's in your fridge?

Draft beers, milk, eggs, rack of lamb, mustards, peanut butter and jelly, bread, lots of produce and milk.

Which chef do you admire most in the world?

Thomas Keller; he's very, very good. And Daniel Barber at Blue Hill at Stone Barns in New York.

If you go Thunder Burger & Bar

- » Where: 3056 M St., NW
- » Info: 202-333-2888
- » Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 a.m. Monday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 2:30 a.m. Saturday, 10 a.m. to 1:30 a.m. Sunday

chefs as Julia Child and Graham Kerr. With support from his family, the teenage Fichter started working as a busboy at Clyde's in Columbia.

In retrospect, Fichter says he cannot pick out just one influence in his culinary career, with the possible exception of chef Kenny Clay, his mentor at Clyde's. "Each place I've worked has given me unique experiences," he explained. "I look

at my career as a whole. I gained my love of pastries from school; of barbecue from the South; of seafood from my time in Hawaii; of fresh greens from working at Clyde's."

With all the training and high-profile input from various chefs, Fichter explains that the challenge of cooking top-notch burgers appeals, especially because he enjoys incorporating game meats, such as elk, into his repertoire. "When I cook these burgers," he said, "I cook them with love. If you do something with love, it shows." That perspective underscores Fichter's cooking credo: Don't manipulate ingredients, and use proper techniques when you cook.

When all is said and done, does Fichter have any regrets about his career choice? "Well," he said, "on the days when I work 13 or 14 hours, maybe I should have been a salesman. But really, I wholeheartedly love this industry. Restaurants are my life, the path I chose."

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

2012 New Year's resolution

In the spirit of the new year, I thought I would share with you some of the personal goals — well, personal wine goals — that I resolve to achieve.

Resolution No. 1: I will try to quantify the value of a wine with a numerical score. As I noted in an article last year, one of the things that I enjoy the most about writing this column is sharing some of the terrific wine values that I have discovered over the years. Nothing is more rewarding than reviewing a good wine and then doing a double take at the price tag. I love finding wines that deliver a lot of quality for a reasonable price — or what I like to call, "Quality-to-Price Ratio." The QPR is the Holy Grail for wine lovers, and the good news is there is a decent amount of high QPR wine on the market.

Over the past year, I have received emails asking me to develop a rating system that readily allows readers to quantitatively compare one wine with another. I have resisted doing this since wine is so subjective and flavor profiles can vary widely from one consumer to another. It's a bit like trying to assign a numerical rating to something as subjective as a piece of art. And I dislike the thought of readers simply reducing their decision about a particular wine based on a scale, system or rating without reading the actual wine review. So I have decided to develop a system that employs the best of both worlds; reviews that incorporate a numerical scale.

Beginning with this column, I will provide a numbered scale, where a rating of 10 would represent the best wine for the money. Since I don't generally review wines that are mediocre — or worse — a rating of 3 or below would be rare because it would represent a below-average QPR.

Resolution No. 2: I will drink more Champagne. Since returning from my trip to the Champagne region, I have been obsessed with bubbly. Besides, I like Champagne for special occasions, so why wouldn't I like it for not so special occasions?

Good Champagne doesn't have to break the bank. I happen to think the **Non-vintage Jean Laurent Blanc de Blanc (\$39)** from Champagne, France, is darn good bubbly for the price. The nose of gardenias and toasted hazelnuts is enough to get your palate ready for the full, lush flavors of buttered toast and crisp green apples. The next time I want a bottle of bubbly for dinner, I will reach for this affordable — and authentic — Champagne. **QPR 8**

Resolution No. 3: I will try more wines that are off the proverbial beaten vineyard path. Life is too short to drink bad wine, yet there

are a lot of good wines from countries that don't always get a lot of attention. In 2012, I will endeavor to reach for a road-lesser-traveled bottle of wine to have with dinner, just for the heck of it.

A good example comes from the steep slopes of the Priorat region of Spain. The **2008 Onix Priorat Classic (\$19)** is produced by a group of small cooperative vineyard owners called La Vinicola del Priorat. This red beauty is made from equal parts of carignan and grenache that have been sourced from vines that are over 60 years of age and then vinified without any use of oak. Aromas of wet stone and black cherry dominate the bouquet while flavors of dark plum, licorice and Asian spices fill out the savory mouthfeel. The spicy finish is smooth and long. **QPR 7**

Another case in point is the **2006 Black Pearl Oro (\$17)** from the Paarl region of South Africa. A blend of shiraz and cabernet sauvignon, it sports aromas of Thin Mint cookies and blackberries. The extra-rich mouthfeel supports luscious flavors of blackberry, black plum and dark chocolate on the front of the palate and notes of black pepper and cinnamon on the long, lingering finish. **QPR 8**



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