



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

"I try to imagine how something will taste before I even try out a recipe," says Tabard Inn chef Paul Pelt.

Paul Pelt: 'Inn' with the chef

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to The Washington Examiner

Paul Pelt, executive chef of D.C.'s beloved Tabard Inn restaurant, may look like a rock star or jazz musician, but this is one man who has focused his adult life on the kitchen and its many charms. A native of Chicago, Pelt moved to D.C. to live on Capitol Hill with his dad during his formative years, and hasn't spent much time away from the city since then.

While Pelt may wistfully dream of traveling to far-off lands to explore other cuisines, he is really dedicated to the culinary arts here in the nation's capital, spending most of his waking life poring over cookbooks and dreaming up memorable fare.

While his dad may have preferred listening to music to cooking, the two still cooked together. By the time Pelt reached adolescence, working at local restaurants, even if just bussing tables, did not seem foreign at all. He remembers one of his first jobs, when he started doing prep work, his boss the chef told him that a line cook would not be in. "You have to cook," he said the chef told him. "And don't mess up or you are out of here."

Pelt didn't mess up, but that job eventually led to many others. "I went through lots of places and ate lots of pizzas and bar food," he explained. "But eventually I got to work in the Tabard Inn back in the '90s, and I loved it." His then-boss encouraged the young man to start reading cookbooks, a habit that he has carried on to the present: he admits to owning stacks and stacks of cookbooks. "One of my favorites is 'Thai Street Food' by David Thompson," he says.

After six years there, Pelt

What is your comfort food?

Chinese food. I like Full Key on University Boulevard in Wheaton. Or Mark's Duck House off Route 50. And I like barbecue. From Chicago ... they like red sauce, a tomato-based sauce and a lot of smoke. If you get ribs, they are put on top of fries, and then there is red sauce on top.

What is your favorite ingredient?

Ginger, scallions and right now, short ribs. I have been taking short ribs, and cooking them with oyster sauce. Broccoli with boneless short ribs, scallions and caramelized onions.

What would you most like to do with a year off?

Travel and eat and hear live

music. I would get a schedule of favorite bands in which cities and what you can eat there. I would spend a lot of time in New York City.

What's in your fridge?

A lot of leftovers. Bacon, eggs, lemongrass, ginger, cilantro, pork stock. Lots of pork stock, for making noodles. I eat a lot of white udon noodles. ... Coconut water, scallions, a cilantro-red curry paste, miso and shrimp.

What cooking tips would you share with home cooks?

Don't be afraid to season. If you overseason, people will forgive you. If you underseason, people will think you cannot cook.

If you go The Restaurant at Hotel Tabard Inn

» **Where:** 1739 N St. NW
» **Info:** 202-331-8528
» **Hours:** Breakfast, 7 to 10 a.m. Monday to Friday, 8 to 9:45 a.m. Saturday, 8 to 9:15 a.m. Sunday; lunch, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; dinner, 6 to 9:30 p.m. Sunday to Thursday, 6 to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; brunch, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Sunday

moved to Rocky's Cafe in Adams Morgan, owned by a friend. When that closed after four years, Pelt moved back to the Tabard Inn,

where he has been cooking since. He began as the executive chef in 2007, and that takes him to the present.

Admittedly, Pelt's creations are simply amazing, and it occurs to an outsider to ask about his source of ideas. "My inspiration," he said. "It is a mixed bag. I read a lot. My favorite foods now are Asian and Italian. ... I like Southern and Caribbean foods." Beyond those influences, Pelt says he will look at an ingredient or several ingredients, and wonder what he would do with it or them. "I try to imagine how something will taste before I even try out a recipe," he said.

Now with many years' experience behind him, Pelt has no regrets about his career choice. But he is sad to know that his dad, who provided him with the initial cooking motivation, did not live long enough to see his son become what he is today.

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

Interesting wines from grapes that you have never heard of

I was recently invited to a dinner party where the theme was "various varietals." The guests were not allowed to bring any "commonly" produced wine.

I applauded the host for going out on a limb and shunning the de rigueur choices of cabernet sauvignon, merlot, chardonnay and the like. After all, there are over 200 fairly common unique grape varietals from which wine is produced, and probably another 300 or 400 varietals of wine grapes that many of us have simply never heard of.

If you are really open to expanding both your proverbial wine horizon as well as your palate, discovering the history behind tasty, lesser known varietals can be its own reward. Even though some wines might contain 10 or more varietals in a bottle (think Chateaufort du Pape), it's still not as easy as one might think.

Best of all, many of these lesser known varietals and blends tend to deliver a lot of quality for the money. Here are four of my favorite wines made from varietals you probably have never heard of, all priced under \$30. Retail prices are approximate.

While you may not think that there is any special about a brut rose wine, wait until you try one produced from Garnatxa and Monastrell. The **Non-vintage Mont-Ferrant Brut Rose (\$20)** is a sparkling wine (cava) from the Penedes region of Spain. The pre-fermented juice, called must, is kept in contact with the skins in order to extract flavor and aroma. The rose color is courtesy of the monastrell grape, which also adds a softer characteristic to the wine. The result produces a sparkling wine with aromas of ripe strawberries and red raspberries and an elegant body with flavors of strawberries, dark cherries and notes of nectarines. **QPR 7**

From a small family winery located in the foothills of the Quilos in the Bierzo region of Spain comes the **2010 Bodegas El Angosto Mencia (\$25)**. The mencia grapes are harvested by hand from vines averaging 60 years old in a vineyard that uses no pesticides or chemicals. The dark-skinned grape produces an intriguing nose featuring scents of smoked meats, black plums and dark currants. The mouthfeel is juicy and luscious, supporting flavors of black and red cherries, red currants and hints of clove and red licorice on the velvety finish. **QPR 7.5**

Located near Lake Garda, in the province of Verona, Italy, is the highly regarded wine region of Valpolicella, known for its prized amarone wines. It is also home to the **2008 Lonardi Ripasso Valpolicella**

(**\$25**), a kid-brother to the more popular amarone, which is made from grapes that have been dried on rooftops in order to concentrate the juice. With ripasso, grapes dried by a similar process are added to the must of a dry wine. This particular offering is made predominantly from the corvina grape, along with rondinella and malinara and offers up lovely flavors of condensed pomegranate, dark cherry, roasted coffee and dried herbs. Notes of dark cocoa highlight the charming finish. **QPR 8.5**

The Mendoza region in Argentina is known mostly for the forward fruit-laden wines made from malbec, but it also has a small production of white wine varietals. The **2010 Vina Alicia Tiara White Wine from Mendoza (\$30)** is made from a blend of riesling, albarino and savagnin that is vinified without oak, but is allowed to ferment in extended contact with its yeast and other sediments. It produces a delightfully complex wine with aromas of lemon/lime citrus, nectarine, honeysuckle and acacia flowers. Flavors of white peach, ripe nectarine and apricot fill the mouth and coat the entire palate. The crisp acidity and bracing minerality highlight the notes of Meyer lemon on the bright, clean finish. **QPR 9**

Note: QPR is a rating system that compares the quality a wine delivers relative to the price. A QPR of 10 is considered an excellent value.



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