



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

Chef Terry Natas, of Carmine's in Penn Quarter, got his start in the business at his family's Greek-American restaurant.

# Terry Natas, natural chef

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Imagine going to work each day knowing you will be cooking for hundreds, if not thousands, of people. That your job is to guarantee excellence with each dish, and as the 700-seat traditional Italian restaurant fills up from lunchtime on into late night, you probably have tasted and tested numerous sauces, pastas and tiramisus. Did they all meet your high standards?

That's the task that Atlantic City native Terry Natas faces each day at Carmine's in Penn Quarter. For many, the eating part would be enviable. But for Natas, who grew up working in his parents' Greek-American restaurant, sampling numerous dishes for quality assurance is simply part of the day's work.

"I come from a first-generation Greek-American family," he said. "All holidays revolved around foods, and my mom makes everything from scratch. My mom is a phenomenal cook." Obviously, the son picked up much of his cooking savvy from his mom. But also Natas' life has involved restaurant work. As a teenager, he says, he started working at a local restaurant and pizzeria, first as a dishwasher, then a busboy, and finally, he worked his way into the kitchen as a cook. "I really enjoyed the cooking part," he said.

By the time he was 18 years old, Natas had gained enough experience to get a job at the Tropicana in Atlantic City as a cook in its Italian kitchen. "I worked under really

## What is your comfort food?

I definitely go back to my roots. Moussaka, pasticcio, orzo with braised lamb, what I grew up on.

## What has been the greatest influence on your cooking career?

I would have to say, having respect for food from an early age, and learning how certain flavors go together so well, such as beets and goat cheese.

## What's in your fridge?

A lot of items from the farmers market, such as cheese, fruits,

fresh vegetables. And a lot of condiments; I go to a Greek grocers online because I like preserved fruits, such as figs.

## What is your signature dish?

It's all very experimental, and when I'm in the mood. So there is no specific dish. I am a "mood" cook.

## What would you do with a year off?

I would travel and eat. I would go to Southeast Asia and France. I take my vacations around food.

## If you go Carmine's

» Where: 425 7th St. NW

» Info: 202-737-7770

» Hours: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 11:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

good chefs," he said. "I worked there for eight years, and before I left, I had become a sous chef." While there, he also took advantage of honing his skills by working for free on his days off in several Philadelphia restaurants.

While still in Atlantic City, Natas moved on to Harrah's Resort, where he also was tasked with overseeing the Italian menu. In 2004, Natas was recruited by Carmine's to be part of its opening team for

Carmine's in the Bahamas, a very desirable post. Later, Carmine's sent him back to New York, where he worked for both Carmine's and an affiliate, Virgil's Real Barbecue.

So when the time came that Carmine's decided to branch out with a D.C. location, it hired Natas to oversee the chef training and to structure the recipes. "That was quite a lesson," he says, recounting that the restaurant's Bolognese meat sauce is so traditional and authentic that the from-scratch concoction takes about 24 hours to cook to perfection. "I make sure that we are duplicating the food [from the original New York-based Carmine's] successfully," he said. "We are always trying to perfect every dish."

No wonder that his family is very proud of him, and that Natas loves what he does, getting energy from the restaurant's fast pace.

## The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

# White wines for summer chillin'

Memorial Day weekend kicks off the psychological beginning of the season. And while I am definitely no slave to fashion, I am also not one to drink only white wines once Monday comes along just because it's summer. The arrival of the summer season just gives me a great excuse to pretend to be in vogue.

Here are a couple of really delicious and affordable white wines to consider putting in your frig or on ice. Retail prices are approximate.

In the eastern part of Veneto, Italy, there is an area of especially fine vineyards with a winemaking tradition extending back to Roman times. This is home to Cantine Torresella winery, where the temperate climate and clay soils produce some of Italy's best wines. The **2010 Torresella Pinot Grigio (\$10)** hails from this prestigious pedigree and offers up flavors of white nectarine, ripe peach, Gala apple and Bosc pear all wrapped around a core of acidity and minerality. The finish is crisp and bracing. **QPR 7**

Torrontes is a white wine that is often overlooked, but it shouldn't be, particularly if you're looking for a charming summer wine to chill out with. The **2010 Bodega Tamari Torrontes Reserva (\$12)** comes from the Fatima Valley in La Rioja, Argentina, where the days are warm and the nights are cool, resulting in bright acidity that lets the true nature of the fruit shine through. Stylish scents of white flowers and tropical fruits shine through on the bouquet while citrusy flavors of grapefruit, nectarine and mango fall onto the wonderfully refreshing finish. **QPR 7.5**

Michel Chapoutier is considered one of the most highly regarded winemakers in the Rhone Valley of France, particularly for his remarkable Hermitage wines. But Chapoutier can also produce some incredibly value-oriented wines that deliver a lot for the money. The **2010 M. Chapoutier Belleruche Blanc (\$13)** from the Cotes-du-Rhone appellation is made from a blend of

grenache blanc, clairette and bourboulenc and delivers an explosion of green apple, orange blossoms, papaya and guava on a remarkably well-balanced frame. The rich mouthfeel carries weight and depth through the medium finish. **QPR 8.5**

I have a hammock in the backyard that needs two things in it this weekend; me and a glass of **2011 Boxwood Winery Rose (\$14)**. This local beauty hails from Middleburg, Va., where the winemaker blends together merlot, cabernet franc and malbec to develop aromas of wild strawberry, kiwi and apricot and flavors of strawberry, bright cherry and watermelon that stay light and bright on the palate, thanks to the extraordinary balance. Abundant acidity keeps the finish refreshing and focused. **QPR 8.5**

The Marlborough region, located in the northern tip of the South Island of New Zealand, is home to two valleys that produce world-class sauvignon blanc wines: Wairau Valley and Awatere Valley. Villa Maria takes grapes from both areas and blends them together for the **2011 Villa Maria Estate Private Bin Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc (\$15)**. The aromatic nose of green grass and grapefruit paves the way for flavors of gooseberry, passion fruit and tropical fruit on the palate. A pop of lemon/lime acidity on the finish is lip-smacking delicious. **QPR 8.5**

Rieslings routinely get a bum rap among American consumers, probably since many inexpensive rieslings cover up their flaws with too much residual sugar, resulting in a sweet, cloying mess. But the wonderfully balanced **2010 Chateau Ste. Michelle Eroica Riesling (\$20)** from the Columbia Valley in Washington is just the thing for summer grilling. Originally conceived as a collaboration between the world-renowned German winemaker Dr. Ernst Loosen and the winemaker for Chateau Ste. Michele, Bob Bertheau, this riesling delivers fresh and tangy flavors of orange blossom and white peach, with lemon/lime undertones. A touch of wet stone seeps in on the lengthy finish. **QPR 9**



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