

## Vikram Sunderam: Rasika's top chef

By Alexandra Greeley  
Special to The Washington Examiner

Sipping some ice water, Vikram Sunderam smiles as he discusses what he calls the great achievement of his cooking career: being named Chef of the Year by the Restaurant Association Metropolitan Washington this June. "This is a great recognition," he says, "especially from one's own fraternity where you work. It's a testimony to all the hard work we, the team, put in ... I am part of a big group."

Sunderam is a great chef, as patrons at either Rasika or Rasika West End understand. Sunderam takes classic Indian fare and, respecting a recipe's authenticity, adds a depth of flavor and one or two contemporary twists.

It's easy to wonder how this super-chef came to be so, well, super. Like many of his colleagues, Sunderam admits that as a teen, a culinary career was about the furthest goal from his mind. Instead, he aimed to become an engineer or doctor. "I never thought I would do this," he says.

What changed his life's ambition might have been in mother's cooking genes. She herself has a reputation as a fine home cook and was delighted when her son chose a culinary career. After graduating from a rigorous training program, Sunderam started working at the Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai, and eventually moved to London with the Taj group.

About three years into his career, Sunderam began to specialize in Indian cuisine, and has become a shining star among Indian chefs. Thanks to Ashok Bajaj, owner of the two Rasikas, Sunderam moved to Washington six years ago to work at the original Rasika in Penn Quarter.

Now overseeing two complementary restaurants, he notes that some of his recipe innovations may



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER

Vikram Sunderam won the Chef of the Year award from the Restaurant Association Metropolitan Washington in June.

### What is your comfort food?

Home-cooked vegetarian prepared by my wife

### What is your most memorable dish?

Palak chaat

### What is the key to cooking success?

Passion, hard work, dedication and consistency.

### What do you do in your leisure time?

Spend quality time with my family. Read, watch movies, play music.

### Where is your favorite restaurant?

I have no single favorite. I love trying out different restaurants and cuisines.

### If you go Rasika West End

» **Where:** 1190 New Hampshire Ave.

» **Info:** 202-466-2500; [rasika.restaurant.com/westend](http://rasika.restaurant.com/westend)

» **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 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday

come from his mother's example. "She liked to try new things," he says. But like every worthy chef, Sunderam does his research as well. "When we develop menus,"

he says, "I always do research in two or three books. We come up with new dishes, not run-of-the-mill ones. We like to be distinctive."

And, of course, Sunderam structures the menus of the two sister restaurants so that each presents both familiar and unknown dishes. While the menus may seem similar, Rasika West End is more contemporary, whereas the original Rasika is more traditional. "We have based the style on traditional recipes," he says. "The main twist [at Rasika West End] is in the plating. For example, a traditional dish may be served in bowls ... such as lamb rogan josh ... here it will be plated. The flavors are the same."

## Vine Guy & Gal » Scott & Cindy Greenberg Annual pizza wine review

Every fall, we jump back into the same hectic routine. School is back in full swing, work is heating up and the weather is cooling down. There are some evenings when trying to navigate rush-hour traffic to make it home in time to prepare a home-cooked meal just isn't in the cards. That's when we run up the white flag and surrender to the siren call of carryout pizza and a good bottle of wine.

While we may not always agree on the type of pizza we like to unwind with, we do agree on three simple rules for "pizza wines." The wine should be able to mix and mingle with a variety of toppings, it has to cost \$20 or less, and it should be easy to find in local wine shops. So in an attempt to help reduce the stress of having to make one more decision at the end of a busy day, we offer our annual picks for the perfect wines to go with pizza. Retail prices are approximate.

### SHE SAID

I really like white pizzas, particularly with caramelized onions. White wines with crisp acidity tend to cut through the richness of the cheese while fresh fruit flavors accent the toppings, so my selections run to the fresher, brighter end of the spectrum.

Of course, no pizza wine article is complete without an Italian selection, like the **2010 Ecco Domani Pinot Grigio delle Venezie (\$12)**. The bouquet features scents of lemon-lime fruit and white flowers. Flavors of tropical fruit and citrus are kept crisp and refreshing on the finish thanks to abundant acidity. **QPR 8**

A very versatile grape varietal with white pizza is viognier, and the **2011 McManis Family Vineyards Viognier (\$12)** from California is a wonderful value. This creamy wine sports flavors of apricot, peach and orange peel on the front of the palate and an attractive fruit sweetness on the lush, lingering finish. **QPR 8.5**

For seafood-based toppings, the

**2010 Craggy Range Te Muna Road Vineyard Sauvignon Blanc (\$18)** from Martinborough, New Zealand, hits all the right notes. From the citrus-oriented nose to the bright flavors of pineapple, nectarine and peach that jump brightly on the palate, this wine shines. The pleasant acidity and distinct notes of passion fruit and vanilla on the finish provide a layer of complexity. **QPR 9**

### HE SAID

My favorite pizzas are usually red sauce-based and piled high with an assortment of meat toppings. This combination adds up to a lot of spicy flavors and greasy goodness, so I am seeking out Italian red wines that will be able to stand up to the flavorful challenges of various spices.

My go-to pizza wine is the **2010 Tormaresca Neprica (\$12)** from Puglia, Italy. It is named after the grapes in the blend, roughly equal parts negroamaro, primitivo and cabernet sauvignon. Aromas of red berries and spicy licorice dominate the nose while flavors of dark fruit and black licorice are balanced in the mouth by subtle tannins and bright acidity. **QPR 9**

A big, spicy pizza needs a big, spicy Sicilian wine, like the **2009 Cusumano Benuara Nero d'Avola Syrah Sicilia (\$17)**. A blend of 70 percent nero d'Avola and 30 percent syrah, it is a bold wine with a full-bodied backbone that supports flavors of blackberry, dark cherry and black plum. The firm tannins provide a well-rounded frame, and the notes of earthiness on the persistent finish will complement pizzas topped with sausage and pepperoni. **QPR 8.5**

For a more delicate pie, I think the **2008 Castello di Bossi Chianti Classico (\$20)** from Tuscany, Italy, is a perfect match. The subtle aromas of red cherry and violets on the nose combine with soft flavors of cherry, red currant and earthy plum in the mouth. Firm tannins and good acidity provide great balance and structure. **QPR 9**

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