

John Melfi: In fashion

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Zeroing in on John Melfi's Italian heritage explains why this young chef de cuisine makes such a natural fit for the kitchen of the fashionable Blue Duck Tavern. He understands ingredients and how to pair them for outstanding results. After all, he says, this Syracuse, N.Y., native grew up cooking in his Italian grandmother's kitchen.

"My Italian grandmother ... made everything from scratch, especially pasta," he said. I started by making breakfast, and she oversaw what I was doing."

Melfi admits to never even having another job in his life apart from cooking. "In the summer, my jobs included working at a farmers market, of bussing tables and washing dishes. I was always saying, 'I want to be a cook.'"

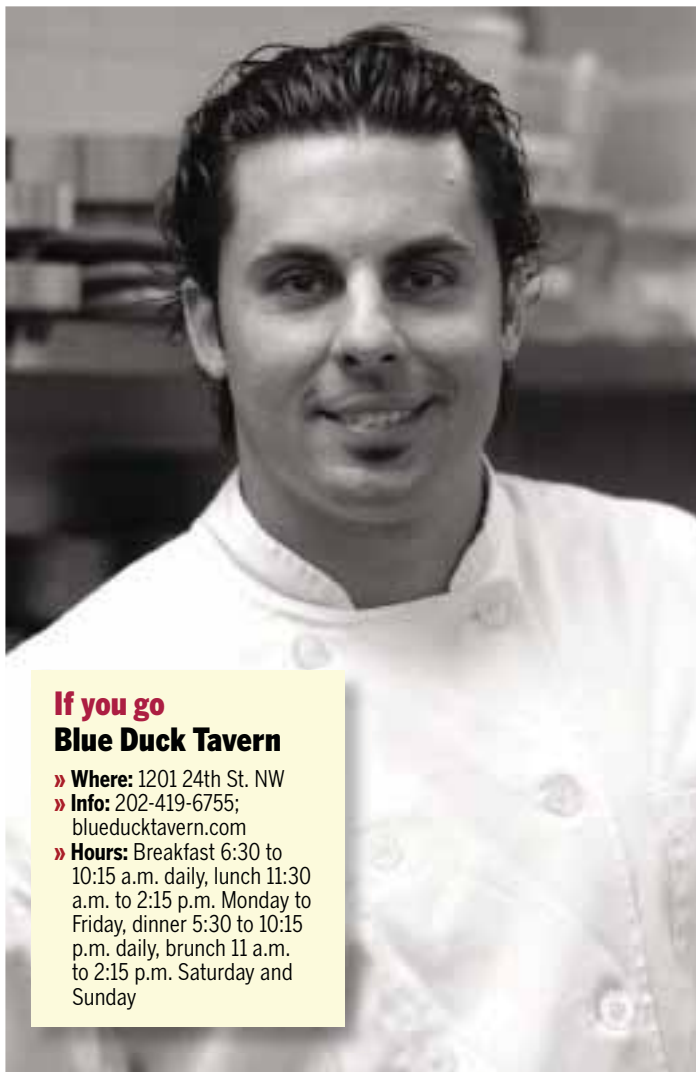
Fortunately, his restaurant experience got its impetus when a small, family-owned diner hired him and eventually moved him up to line cook. While still in high school, he decided to enter a program to double-check if cooking was the career he really wanted. It was. Melfi, after graduating at the top of his class, chose to attend the Pennsylvania Culinary Institute, which eventually merged with Le Cordon Bleu. He graduated first in his class, heading then for an externship in Naples, Fla., with French chefs.

"I loved the restaurant scene and learning the basics," he said. "Especially from old-school French chefs Alain Petitbon and Pierre Dousson." His next career move included several restaurant jobs in Charleston, S.C., where he gained management experience working under Frank Lee of Maverick Southern Kitchens. "He was kind of a pioneer chef in Charleston in traditional Southern cuisine with local produce," Melfi said. "I worked there for five and a half years and got my first sous chef job there."

Melfi then became executive chef for the Seabrook Island Resort at the age of 25. "It had several outlets, such as fine dining and a pub," he said. "I learned a lot, but it was not something I wanted to do that young."

His next career step, 5 1/2 years ago, took him to Vidalia in D.C., and shortly thereafter he became the restaurant's executive sous chef. "There I learned a lot about how to run a successful fine-dining restaurant and I was working with James Beard Award winners. It was cool. Chef Jeff Buben is a master."

With top-notch training, Melfi was a natural hire for Blue Duck Tavern, first for its former executive chef, Brian McBride, and now his current boss, Sebastien Archam-



COURTESY PHOTO

Chef John Melfi highlights traditional cooking methods at Blue Duck Tavern.

If you go Blue Duck Tavern

- » **Where:** 1201 24th St. NW
- » **Info:** 202-419-6755; blueducktavern.com
- » **Hours:** Breakfast 6:30 to 10:15 a.m. daily, lunch 11:30 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. Monday to Friday, dinner 5:30 to 10:15 p.m. daily, brunch 11 a.m. to 2:15 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

What is your comfort food?
My grandma's pasta, my mom's chicken soup, my grandfather's house-made sausage. It was Italian sausage that he made with a little grinder at kitchen table. I was the cranker.

Which is your favorite restaurant?
I don't go out to fancy places. We are really into tacos, like at Taqueria La Placita in Hyattsville. We also like Osteria in Philadelphia and Woodberry Kitchen in Baltimore.

What has been the greatest influence on your cooking?
Southern cooking, because it was a time in my career when I could absorb as a cook and

convert ideas as a sous chef and put my ideas onto the menu. You are in the form of an artist. I learned about farm-to-table, so I didn't turn to New Zealand for lamb.

What's in your fridge?
Hot Pockets, juices, apples, fruit and eggs, for days off.

Where is your favorite place in the world?
I would say Italy, and we just went there for the first time. Both my grandparents are off the boat from Italy. ... Because of my heritage and its history, and how many things they refined and we still use today in our cuisine.

bault. "I just grabbed the kitchen work by the horns, and I am so glad I was picked, so happy and honored," he said. "It was hard work because I was by myself for several months

after Brian left." With the new team in place, Melfi is free to highlight traditional cooking methods by using modern technology and the best local ingredients possible.

Vine Guy & Gal » Scott & Cindy Greenberg He said/she said: Debatable wines

Like most couples who raise children together, travel together and taste wine together, we do not always agree on every topic. And while we are usually in the same camp on the big issues, wine and politics seem to be the two areas where we occasionally have a difference of opinion. Sometimes it's big, sometime it's small, but we always have a good time defending our positions.

So in the spirit of the current political climate and the final presidential debate on Monday, we thought it would be fun to select several wines which we typically have different views on and stage our own deliberation. Cindy won the coin toss, so she will begin each review. Retail prices are approximate.

2011 Nobile Icon Sauvignon Blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand (\$20)

She said: I usually enjoy sauvignon blanc wines from New Zealand for their palate-cleansing crispness and grassy notes. This wine delivers both. The tropical fruit flavors are supported by those notes and zesty citrus undertones. It strikes a nice balance between refreshing acidity and bright fruit. **QPR 9**

He said: I think this is a beautiful expression of New Zealand sauvignon blanc, but I tend to lean more toward the tropical fruit characteristics in this varietal. I really like the juicy flavors of mango and papaya that fill in the midpalate, but the fresh-cut grass notes that show up in the bouquet and on the crisp finish are a bit too distracting for my taste. **QPR 7.5**

2010 Kendall-Jackson Grand Reserve Chardonnay, Santa Barbara and Monterey counties, Calif. (\$22)

She said: This chardonnay is a blend of the best estate-grown grapes from four different elevations along the cool coastal climates of California's Central Coast. The lots are vinified separately and then blended to produce flavors of peach, nectarine and citrus on the slightly creamy frame. I like the lush finish and touch of vanilla at the end. **QPR 8.5**

He said: I really like the complexity and depth that this wine delivers for the money. The sur lie (the wine is left in contact with the yeast and other sediments after fermentation) aging definitely adds a certain richness to the flavors of ripe apple, nectarine and lemon-lime tart found throughout the palate. I too like the vanilla characteristics on the medium-bodied finish. **QPR 8.5**

2011 Domaine Joseph Drouhin Laforet Bourgogne Pinot Noir, Burgundy, France (\$15)

She said: Domaine Joseph Drouhin, one of the oldest and largest producers in Burgundy, uses



COURTESY PHOTO

Both Scott and Cindy Greenberg are in agreement over the quality of the 2010 Kendall-Jackson Grand Reserve Chardonnay.

grapes from more than a dozen appellations in the region to produce a wine that really expresses the varietal. Bright flavors of strawberry, cranberry and red cherry are expressed with extraordinary freshness on the palate. Between the long, clean finish and the low price, I love this wine. **QPR 9.5**

He said: While this is a charming wine, I tend to want more oomph from my pinot noir. I do like the bright notes of cherry and red berry, but I think that the lack of new oak (the wine is aged in used oak barrels) causes the wine to be a little too one-dimensional for my tastes. I do, however, agree that the finish is pretty and the price is appealing. **QPR 7.5**

2009 Borgo Scopeto Borgonero Chianti, Tuscany, Italy (\$24)

She said: This blend of sangiovese, cabernet sauvignon and syrah is referred to as a "Super Tuscan" wine because it uses nonindigenous grapes. It is a big wine with concentrated flavors of black fruit up front and a powerful, slightly tannic finish featuring tobacco and dried herbs. **QPR 8**

He said: I really like sangiovese, and the additional varietals definitely add to the structure of this wine. The big black and red fruit flavors expand in the mouth and unfold in layers of complexity. Notes of tobacco and smoky wood beautifully integrate with the firm tannins on the long, powerful finish. **QPR 9.5**

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.