

Ciji Wagner drafts meals

By Alexandra Greeley
Special to *The Washington Examiner*

Imagine going from frosting cupcakes to overseeing a kitchen that produces beer-braised brisket and fried pickles. Such is the case with executive chef Ciji Wagner of the recently opened Drafting Table restaurant near Logan Circle. That must be a dizzying culinary turn-around. But, thankfully, Wagner is a skilled and well-trained chef — she graduated from the Culinary Institute of America.

And, as it turns out, the Pennsylvania native has always been interested in baking and cooking since she was a little girl and had always wanted to be a chef. Her primary inspiration to enter the culinary world came from her parents. “My mom was a lunch lady at a high school cafeteria,” she said, “and my dad was a sales manager for a company that worked with restaurants. They know what it is like in the kitchen. Also, Mom loved to cook meals at home that bring people together, and I always wanted to be a part of it.”

Unsure of whether to specialize in the pastry or savory side of the kitchen, Wagner sought advice from a chef for whom she worked while in high school. He told her that in the end, those who are trained as pastry chefs end up knowing how to cook better than others who are not.

While working for Red Velvet Cupcakery, the parent company of Drafting Table, Wagner learned that her boss was considering opening a savory restaurant in D.C. Interested in possibly working there, she began bringing in food for management to sample. In the end, they loved what she was doing and offered her the job to open up Drafting Table.

Thrilled with the opportunity, Wagner says she loves the job but admits it has been a challenge to make the switch. “But I love being creative and putting together flavors and dishes,” she said. “The



GRAEME JENNINGS/EXAMINER
Drafting Table chef Ciji Wagner says she loves putting together flavors and dishes.

If you go Drafting Table

» **Where:** 1529 14th St. NW
» **Info:** 202-621-7475;
draftingtabledc.com
» **Hours:** 4 to 11 p.m. Monday
to Wednesday, 4 p.m. to 12
a.m. Thursday, 4 p.m. to 2
a.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 2 a.m.
Saturday, 10 a.m. to 12 a.m.
Sunday

recipes are mine ... and I have control of the menu.” She adds that she has trained one of her chefs to take charge of the desserts, adding that while she may miss all the sweet stuff, as executive chef she has more cooking options.

Wagner has found most of her savory inspiration straight from the sweet side of the kitchen. Take the lemon curd served with the fish and chips entree. “It is something I want and enjoy eating, and I put on a twist to make it interesting,” she said. She adds that her best-seller at Drafting Table is the Draftsman Burger of braised brisket and crispy blue cheese. “It is sweet, savory, really well-balanced,” she says. “The next-best-seller is the falafel.”

The Vine Guy » Scott Greenberg

All I want for Christmas

Twelve days of Christmas. Twelve bottles of wine in a case. Coincidence? Maybe. But if I could unwrap just one present on Christmas morning, it would be this case of wines. Retail prices are approximate.

No case would be complete without at least one bottle of Champagne. The nonvintage **Pierre Gimmonnet & Fils Blanc de Blancs Brut (\$40)** from France is made exclusively from chardonnay, and flavors of creamy lemon and nectarine are elegantly woven around a core of acidity and tight bubbles, giving the wine wonderful balance and structure. **QPR 9**

For spicier meals, it's smart to have a bottle of **2011 Weingut Johannisof Charta Riesling (\$16)** from Rheingau, Germany, on hand. The beautifully textured flavors of white peach, tropical fruits, candied citrus peel and orange blossom come together in harmony on a not-too-sweet frame. The lively acidity provides a crisp, mouth-watering finish. **QPR 9**

Another food-friendly favorite is the **2011 Lake Chalice Pinot Gris (\$20)** from Marlborough, New Zealand. The flavors of white peach, pear and crenshaw melon feel juicy yet elegant in the mouth. The burst of citrusy acidity on the finish keeps the palate refreshed. **QPR 8.5**

I like the concept behind organic wines, by which the land is treated with respect. The **2011 Paul Dolan Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc (\$18)** from Potter Valley in Mendocino, Calif., uses these principles to produce a wine that is full of kiwi, papaya, lime and lemon grass flavors, kept bright on the palate by tangy acidity, thanks to the cold nights and hot days. **QPR 8**

Many Rhone Valley wines have to have a little age on them before they can be enjoyed, but the **2011 Charles Thomas Cotes du Rhone Rouge (\$12)**

from France is a steal that is ready to drink right now. A blend of syrah, grenache and mourvedre, the wine is bursting with red plum and ripe red cherries. The smooth tannins and juicy finish make this a versatile red to pair with a wide variety of dishes. **QPR 9.5**

Sometimes I crave a good rustic bottle of wine that mentally transports me to Spain, like the **2007 Montecillo Crianza Rioja (\$12)** from Spain. This 100 percent tempranillo opens with scents of cigar box and smoky cedar. Flavors of red plum, cherry and tobacco mingle with earthy tannins and finish with a touch of dried herbs on the medium-bodied frame. **QPR 9**

The **2007 Casa Lapostolle Merlot Cuvee Alexandre (\$18)** from the Colchagua Valley of Chile is a wonderful value in forward-styled red wines. From the expressive nose of red fruit to the deep flavors of eucalyptus, black raspberry and blueberry fruit in the front of the mouth, as well as hints of ripe cherry and warm vanilla on the satisfying finish. **QPR 8.5**

The **2010 Ken Wright Pinot Noir (\$30)** from Willamette Valley, Ore., is a pinot on the weightier side and sports aromas of violet and wild strawberry that are repeated on the palate, where they join rich flavors of cherry, fresh raspberry and juicy plum. Touches of mineral mingle with notes of graphite and spice to produce a profoundly elegant finish. **QPR 9**

Australia is known for its big shiraz-based wines, like the **2007 Mitolo G.A.M. Shiraz (\$30)** from McLaren Vale. This wine is bursting at the seams with flavors of jammy blackberry, dark plum, rich cocoa and black licorice. Notes of toasty oak, vanilla and black pepper dominate the full, lush finish. **QPR 9.5**

One of the best malbecs I have had all year is the **2007 Las Moras**



COURTESY PHOTO

Finca Pedernal Malbec (\$45) from the high-elevation vineyards in San Juan, Argentina. Powerful flavors of black cherry, dark cassis and black plum punch the palate up front, while notes of chocolate and mint dance on the long, complex finish. **QPR 9**

Forget the down comforter. I am going to use the **2008 Rodney Strong Rockaway Cabernet Sauvignon (\$65)** from the Alexander Valley of Sonoma County, Calif., to keep me warm this winter. This single-vineyard wine features jammy blackberry, dark chocolate, black licorice and warm vanilla flavors that shine across the entire palate on their way to a well-balanced and smooth finish. **QPR 9.5**

My big splurge this year will be the **2007 Frescobaldi CastelGiocondo Brunello di Montalcino (\$75)**. This wine is released only after spending three years maturing in oak casks and then six more months in bottles. Made exclusively from sangiovese, the flavors of rich red plum, black cherry and blackberry are layered across the palate. Notes of vanilla, allspice, tobacco and coffee gently materialize on the beautifully balanced 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.*

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