



B O U R B O N S T E A K

W A S H I N G T O N , D . C .

Craft Magic

Torrence Swain at BOURBON STEAK at Four Seasons Hotel Washington, DC

Torrence Swain grew up in a dry household, an unlikely start for one of the new, gifted mixologists emerging on the cocktail scene in the nation's capital. But to hear him tell it in his humble way, his success is not as much about the spirits he offers, as the hospitality. That, the foundation of his craft, he learned at home in Virginia's Tidewater, where he was Chief Bowl-Licker in his grandmother's kitchen, a haven of comfort food and warm welcomes. Swain's professional service roots date back to age fourteen, when his older brother, a chef, got him a job washing dishes in a local Cajun joint. Thoughtful and well-read, he's been hard at work ever since, attending classes at Hampton University in Mass Media-Public Relations and gaining recognition as an inspired concoctor of cocktails along the way.

Swain's first experience behind the bar was at a chain restaurant where he'd begun as a server. Even then, pouring beer and pre-mixed Margaritas and Long Island Iced Teas, he developed a reputation for recalling drink preferences, a knack on which he still prides himself, whether his guest is alone at the bar, or three-deep at a big event. "If I don't make the person on the other side of the bar feel like the most important person in the room, I'm not doing my job," he says. Where the drinks themselves were concerned, he knew there had to be more to it, though it would be years before he was exposed to the craft cocktail movement of which he is now an acknowledged leader in Washington.

It wasn't until after he'd moved to DC and was behind the bar in a small suburban lounge that Swain discovered a world of craft bartending. He found it difficult to apply the concepts and techniques of crafting artisanal beverages in his job at the time, he was hooked, and headed to a craft conference in New York at his first opportunity. He got himself hired as a server at Farmers Fishers Bakers, the Georgetown establishment of the eco-progressive Farm Restaurant Group, and was soon put on the bar team. The senior 'bar guys' in the group were Swain's original mentors in the field; each, like wise sages, imparting an understanding of a different aspect of craft cocktails, be it the inspiration of fresh ingredients or the origin of various spirits. There, he honed his natural talent, sharpening his efficiency, speed, and knowledge. He had reached the position of Head Bartender when he was approached to apply at BOURBON STEAK, a Michael Mina restaurant anchoring Four Seasons Hotel Washington, DC a few blocks away in Georgetown.

The renowned Duane Sylvestre, Swain's predecessor at the helm of the BOURBON STEAK bar, served as his next important mentor. "Honestly, for me, trips to the Four Seasons had been pretty scant until I actually landed here," admits Swain. "But Duane built this program and pushed it to the forefront. It was both awe-inspiring and daunting to take on this mantle." Swain has re-organized the cocktail list and made it his own, endowing it with colorful "Southern boy" phrases that pepper his own speech and fortuitously evoke Low-Country culinary roots. "Hold My Mule" is a category named for an old spiritual of Swain's Southern Pentecostal upbringing. "Refresh Yourself" is where you'll find citrus-based drinks, and "Savor the Moment" will get you a quaff of, you guessed it, something savory. All the drinks listed under "Tip of the Hat" are nods to mentors and colleagues, graciously honoring

the creations of others. "I'm standing on the shoulders of giants in the industry," notes Swain, "and I'm lucky enough to be working alongside some of them."

Swain's beverage program at BOURBON STEAK parallels the kitchen's culinary approach to the menu: creating elegant contemporary twists on American steakhouse favorites. In Swain's case, that means keeping the focus on classic and modern cocktails, and developing ingenious innovations of his own, using only the premium ingredients, whether they be small batch liqueurs from little-known purveyors, fresh herbs from the restaurant's courtyard garden, or bitters created in-house. "I love that whole beautiful kaleidoscope of options we draw from to create a cocktail, either for the menu or a unique drink at a patron's request. There's nothing more gratifying than delighting someone with something new and unexpected."

That said, as Swain explains, it all comes back to giving guests an unmatched level of hospitality: "I tell all my junior bartenders: You can learn a thousand drink recipes, but if folks don't enjoy your company, it's not going to matter!" At the bar of BOURBON STEAK, where he provides exquisite drinks with affable warmth, you'll wonder how any other bartender or bar establishment ever managed without either.

BOURBON STEAK at Four Seasons Hotel Washington, DC

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