

Personality Plus

ON CHARLESTON, SC'S RESTAURANT SCENE, RELEVANCE HINGES ON EVOLUTION BEHIND THE BAR *story by Helen Mitternacht / photos by paulcheney.com*

AS STALWARTS ON the Charleston, South Carolina, dining scene, Slightly North of Broad (which opened in 1993) and Halls Chophouse (open since 2009) are both known for their consistent excellence. But in a city where new restaurants seem to open every week, they don't hew strictly to tradition: Their innovative beverage programs help guarantee they remain relevant.



JASON MALE, bartender, *Slightly North of Broad*

A bartender at Slightly North of Broad—or SNOB, as the restaurant is amusingly nicknamed—for more than three years, Jason Male likes to ensure that the cocktail menu reflects SNOB's ethos as a Southern bistro serving comfort food with an upscale twist. Take The Barnraiser, which has been on the menu for 13 years: "It's simple but elegant, which I think sums up some of the greatest cocktails in existence," Male says. "We infuse honey into bourbon in house, using Benchmark Bourbon; add a dash or two of orange bitters; and top it with Blenheim Ginger Ale. It's such a crowd-pleaser with the spice and the honey: It works for a whiskey drinker, but that balance helps people not accustomed to whiskey."

The classics aren't enough to keep customers coming back, though. "To keep fresh, I give myself a challenge—take an odd ingredient or two you wouldn't think would go together and figure out how to make it taste great," Male explains. "Recently, I challenged myself to work with avocado oil, so I made a Margarita by infusing it into tequila. It took about two weeks to develop, but that process of giving yourself a challenge and working through it—that's how you develop an amazing cocktail menu."

Also key to repeat business, of course, is good service. "On top of making all of the drinks for the entire restaurant, you have to have a personality. The number-one rule is entertainment if you're a bartender," Male notes.



CARTER CURREY, beverage director, *Halls Chophouse*

The family-run Halls Chophouse consistently gets named among the country's top steak restaurants (for instance, it was number three on TripAdvisor's list of top fine-dining spots in the U.S. last year). When Carter Currey was given Hall Management Group proprietor and CEO Tommy Hall's number for an interview, he had no idea he'd become beverage director at such a prestigious place.

But Currey caught on quickly. In the eight years he's been at Halls, he's achieved certification through the Court of Master Sommeliers and added a bit of his own personality to the beverage menu. "When I started, [Hall Management Company founder] Bill Hall Sr. was still alive, and it took everything I had to convince him that there were good wines outside of California," Currey says. The wine program still favors domestic labels, but it has moved beyond Napa and Sonoma to include bottlings from France, Italy, Spain, Chile, and other regions.

When it comes to spirits, says Currey, "Bourbon is king and vodka is queen" in Charleston. The former stars in the restaurant's popular oak-aged Manhattan, an example of his endeavor to take simple cocktails to "the next level," in his words. "We use Benchmark Bourbon—it's basically baby Buffalo Trace—and then we use sweet vermouth and bitters and allow the whole thing to age in our own barrels about two to three weeks. It gives it that nice touch of oak without being overzealous."

But Currey also notes that he has seen drink preferences change in recent years. High-end tequilas are sharing shelf space with the bourbons, and nonalcoholic cocktails are also becoming more popular. He aims to meet those needs. "In a restaurant of our caliber, the guest more so than ever is focused on how their dollar is spent. Our job, because they trust us, is making sure they are spending that dollar on the best." 