

## Banking on his success



Laurence Kelly/Freelance

04.05.2014 HOT CHEF Tom Harkins (pictured here) of Evesham, NJ prepares a corn pea salad. Harkins is opening a new restaurant, Bank & Bourbon Restaurant and Bar, at Loews Philadelphia Hotel 1200 Market Street. Laurence Kelly/Freelance

He was a South Philly kid who loved to cook. So he did, following his passion all the way to the Culinary Institute of America, aka the CIA.

For Thomas Harkins, now a resident of Evesham, it wasn't an easy road.

"My family wasn't wealthy, and there were five of us. My father died when I was 12, so it was tough for me to get to the CIA and stay there. I worked my way through, helping to cater parties in very fancy homes, but the experience was unbelievable."

Harkins persevered, and began the climb for recognition. It has come steadily.

Among many other milestones, the 45 year-old Harkins has worked at the Bonaventure Resort and Spa, the Hotel Atop the Bellevue, and many other local landmarks. He has been invited to cook at the James Beard House four times.

And now, the chef with the ready smile and easy manner presides over a major restaurant in a major city.

It is executive chef Thomas Harkin who has launched Center City's Bank & Bourbon in the landmark PSFS bank building, at the Loews Hotel on Market Street.

The building itself, officially the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society, was the first savings bank in the United States. and an awesome sight back in the era of the Great Depression. It opened in stages between 1932 and 1933, and was only the world's second structure to have air conditioning.

"You just have to respect a building with this kind of history," said Harkins. "It's even on the National Register of Historic Places."

And that respect was uppermost in designing the new urban restaurant.

The vibe is ultra-sleek modern, but with warm touches of natural materials, and a conviviality that's immediately obvious.

But this is no snooty clubhouse for the privileged, although its trappings are decidedly upscale.

"I'm all about fresh food that tastes wonderful, and some surprises, too," said Harkins, who has been developing the restaurant's menu for months, doing tastings among the staff and tweaking and revising as he goes.

"When a chef plans a menu, he has to be careful about thinking not of his own palate, and not just of dazzling the gourmets who come in," explained

Harkins. "It's the whole general public that has to see something on that menu that appeals and intrigues."

Even before the grand opening earlier this month, Harkins was perfecting that menu which now is tilted toward traditional American fare, but with a twist.

Fortunately, the chef has long experience in beginnings. He opened the famous Founders Room in the Bellevue Hotel, along with the 210 Restaurant at the upscale Rittenhouse Hotel in Philadelphia, which Zagat named the "Best Continental Restaurant" in the city after its opening in the 1990s.

He also was the executive chef at Sole Food, the restaurant that formerly occupied the totally renovated space at Loews.

For Harkins, even salads need to be special. Consider Bank & Bourbon's roasted baby carrots with yogurt, chipotle pepper, honey, pistachios and toasted quinoa as an example of how to start a meal.

The restaurant features a wide variety of appetizers and has elaborate cheese stations, along with substantial dishes like steak tartare with horseradish, arugula and quail egg for those who like the exotic, but also loves to offer pastrami, beef short ribs and steak.

Other creative dishes include dry-aged burger with green herb sauce and poblano pepper, roasted corn-snap pea salad (the chef loves corn) with goat cheese, sesame granola, petite greens and citrus vinaigrette.

The lamb plate with roasted, crisped belly, lamb sausage, carrots and peas, seems to welcome spring.

And yes, of course there are decadent deserts like butterscotch sundae with chocolate, vanilla and salted caramel ice creams, and hot fudge, pies for two, and six-layer German chocolate cake to bust any diet.

The "Bourbon" part of the restaurant's name is not taken lightly. The restaurant features a bourbon barrel-aging program for unique house-aged cocktails and liquors, and finds inventive ways to present them, including in a replica of an old medicine bottle.

There are lockers where bourbon, whiskey and rye enthusiasts can have their favorites on-site.

So yes, life has been busy — make that frantic — for the chef.

"Our grand opening was just amazing," said Harkins. "My mother, Mary, who's 81, and still watches over me, was begging me to take it easy, but this is a tough business, and beginnings are especially tough."

For now, Harkins is happy to be presiding over a restaurant that satisfies the American appetite for hearty food, and also respects those who choose the lighter side.

And the best day of his current life?

"There was one recent Sunday when I was off, and the sun was shining. I took out the grill in our yard and picked up pork chops at Trader Joe's."

Then the chef grilled the chops and enjoyed a backyard day with his favorite diners: his wife Janet, and daughters Katelin, 8 and Alexa, 3.

"It may not sound like much," he said, "but for us, it was the pure heaven."