

It's in the vault

With a SJ chef at the helm, Bank & Bourbon honors history while creating something new

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Philadelphia's Bank & Bourbon chef Thomas Harkins of Marlton banks on the restaurant's classic style and new

Built in 1932, the former Philadelphia Savings Fund Society building stands as many things today: The city's first skyscraper. A National Historic Site. The Philadelphia Loews Hotel.

Now dwarfed by many high risers, the 36-floor building remains famous for its history.

Like its past, its future may very well begin on the ground floor and with Marlton resident Thomas Harkins.

The executive chef has headed Bank & Bourbon since April 9, trying to keep the new American restaurant as busy as the 12th and Market streets it's located on.



Bank & Bourbon's designers created a warm, luxurious yet comfy space. / Chris LaChall/Daily Journal

IF YOU GO

Bank & Bourbon, 1200 Market St. Philadelphia. (215) 231-7300. bankandbourbon.com

Of course, some people will look past the iconic PSFS letters that illuminate the top of the skyscraper, its stunning style and revolutionary bar and just see something else: a hotel restaurant.

"To be honest, when you come in here, we want you to feel like you're walking into a freestyle restaurant that's not a part of the hotel," Harkins says. "We wanted to feel like not a typical hotel restaurant. We want you to feel like you just walked off 13th Street and walked into a restaurant that's really hopping."

"You could be a fabulous restaurant but if you're a restaurant in a hotel, there's a stigma attached to it," adds Jaimi Gordon, restaurant spokesperson. "We just so happen to be on the bottom floor of 531 rooms, but we are Bank & Bourbon at 12th and Market."

New vision

Harkins is familiar with hotel restaurants, having been at the helm of Loew's former "seafood-centric" eatery, Solefood, for nearly a decade.

He is banking on Bank & Bourbon's classic style and new substance to stump out any stigma.

"This concept was probably thought out a little better because we have seafood, we have steak and we have other things on the menu that actually a lot of people can identify with," Harkins says. "It's a rebirth here."

In fewer than two weeks of service, Harkins is seeing the sentiment turn.

"I've had guests come to me and asked 'Is this leased out? Are you renting this?' " he says. "It doesn't feel like it's part of a hotel and that's what we're trying to get across."

Harkins credits Mark Weiss, vice president of food and beverage, with the new vision.

"He looked around and in four days he said this is what we're going to do," Harkins says. "We're going to take this way down, do this and this, and he had a name in three days after that. He said create a rustic American style menu around the concept. That's what we did."

After about six months of remodeling, the space is hardly recognizable.

"The old restaurant was all marble," he says of Solefood. "It was darker, colder. This is totally different."

While soft lighting, wood ceiling beams, exposed pipes and leather banquettes create a sophisticated yet comfy space, its spacious floor plan showcases the classic architecture that attract architecture classes from all over.

Diners have a variety of seating options at Bank & Bourbon, including a 26-seat bar, lounge, dining room and private dining rooms, named the Bourbon Room, Whiskey Room and Rye Room.

The restaurant honors its bank past with more than just in its name, featuring Cartier clocks and a giant safe.

"We made a promise to incorporate the original architectural elements because this is not just an important building to Philadelphia," Gordon says. "It's an important building in the architectural world."

Something brewing

With all its history, Bank & Bourbon is making more with the city's only barrel-aging program.

The next best thing to vaults, this former bank holds 70 private lockers in which whiskey lovers can store and age their favorites on site, says General Manager Alex Amato.

Three tiers of membership are available, ranging from \$600 to \$800. With the platinum level, members can fill their barrels with private batches by Hudson Whiskey or Monkey Shoulder, whereas those on the silver entry level "can put something like Makers Mark," says Amato.

Bank & Bourbon has staggered the Hudson and Monkey Shoulder whiskeys to show what happens in the aging process.

"We also create these in batches so they can try something that has been aged for 30 days, 60 days or 90 days to see the subtle nuances that happen to a spirit in a barrel," says Amato, who sold 15 lockers within its first week.

The first fill with the spirit of the owner's choosing is included in the membership, with additional fills at the owner's expense.

"They'll come in and they'll try their bourbon two to three times a month, sip it with friends or bring a large group in and share it with friends," Amato says. "They're pretty much signing on to try it from time to time."

Members will rarely drink alone with bourbon master Brian Bevilacqua on hand, ready to educate them on more than 75 bourbon, rye and international whiskeys comprising its selection.

Bevilacqua, who will host educational tastings and events, would be wise to recall the restaurant's signature drink, the Secret Knock, a milk punch and a favorite of Benjamin Franklin's.

Simple pleasures

Education is rarely this tasty. Well, maybe except for Harkins.

After graduating from the Culinary Institute of America in 1989, Harkins acquired knowledge in kitchens at The Moshulu, Circa, Plate and Restaurant 210 before heading Solefood.

After all his savory stops, Harkins favors simplicity.

"Every item I have on the menu is very identifiable," says the married father of two, who, in addition to the menu, designed the kitchen layout. "We don't do foams here, we don't do jellies and things like that. But we have hams on the menu. Who doesn't like ham?"

Some other simple items include corn, carrots, grilled cheese and the current bestselling burger.

"It's from LaFrieda in New York," Harkins says of the beef. "They have the best grind of hamburger meat, we have the best grind that they make, which is dry aged. We serve it with a pureed green herbed garden sauce and cheddar cheese and homemade pickles, and it's very simple and comes out with homemade French fries, but people come in and they don't change it. They eat it as is and we sell a ton of it."

Not everything was simple. With 18 months to design the menu, he spent countless hours devising dishes that would complement the restaurant's signature spirit.

"I think of how it's aged, the essence of barrels and the smokiness and the flavors of the vanilla and citrus and all those flavors that are included in bourbon ... when I did a dish," he says.

To match the smokiness of the spirit, he fiddled around with flames in a lab downstairs, poaching eggs, smoking corn and charring other veggies. He extinguished some of those ideas.

"I was going nuts," he says. "Then I was, 'OK, this might be a little too aggressive,' but there were things that I could take from that."

From out of the flames came a smoked pastrami which is marinated for three days and other fiery foods.

"The carrots have chipotle and some spice in them. There are some characteristics of when you drink bourbon that match with the food, there's no question that I thought about that."

Fancy touches

A fan of simple standards, Harkins also enjoys sprucing them up now and then.

"I do some curry cavatelli fused with fresh baked curry powder and I jerked some pork shoulder, shredded it and tossed it all together," he says. "It's a classic dish, but it was done on a riff and it was awesome."

While cognizant of creating cuisine that complement bourbon, Harkins doesn't let the spirit spill over into the food menu.

"I didn't want to be cliché and say OK we're going to have this dish with bourbon and that with bourbon," he says. "It's unnecessary. If there's a time and place where I think it's right, I'll do it."

He does whisk the whiskey into one dessert.

"We have a bourbon German chocolate cake which is phenomenal," he says.