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Domains | Bill Whitlow, Seelbach bartender

12:47 AM, Apr. 30, 2011|

Bill Whitlow has Prohibition to thank for the complexity of tending bar in the Seelbach Hilton hotel's Oakroom. That's because the majority of the bar's liquor is located in an adjoining room. That adds steps — and time — to every order.

“Bartending is always about minimizing your steps and doing three things at a time,” Whitlow said. But if any Eliot Ness types drop by, the pass-through door to the liquor room can be shut, replacing the view of one of the city's best bourbon collections with a prim nautical scene.

In the two months that Whitlow has worked at the Seelbach, he has had to learn the trick of working on five drinks at a time so he can make the most out of his trips to the back room — not making a separate dash for every bottle.

“It's different from a lot of bars, because it's built around the history of the hotel,” Whitlow said.

The history of the bar impressed Whitlow when he started working there — it was a favorite of F. Scott Fitzgerald's, and the author of “The Great Gatsby” certainly liked to drink.

“It gave me the drive to come up with new things,” Whitlow said. “I wanted to fill the shoes of the bar.”

With the help of the Seelbach's , Bobby Benjamin, Whitlow has been experimenting with some of the more esoteric numbers in the barkeep's repertoire — like liquid nitrogen. On a recent afternoon, he was flash-freezing mint leaves for an experimental julep. “You wouldn't get that in a normal bar,” Whitlow deadpanned.

Since most of his customers are hotel guests, Whitlow doesn't see regulars night after night. One of the side effects of this is that he gets to introduce a lot of out-of-town visitors to good bourbon. Whitlow likes to watch their reactions. “It really surprises someone who is used to Jim Beam and Jack Daniel's when they taste something flavorful and exciting.”

It may also please Whitlow's customers to know that, should a latter-day temperance movement seize the nation, the Seelbach's stash of the good stuff is secure.

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