

# The Capitol Grille

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The chefs of this historic Nashville eatery strive to be leaders in their culinary community

For much of its 98-year history, the Hermitage Hotel was the social hub of Downtown Nashville. Built in 1910, the hotel's Beaux Arts elegance has attracted both the famous and infamous from politics, business and the arts. Luminaries such as Bette Davis, Greta Garbo and Al Capone have enjoyed the hotel's comforts. The ultimate pool shark Minnesota Fats lived at the hotel for eight years and took on all comers at his own pool table in the mezzanine. Not only has it played host to six presidents—starting with William Howard Taft in 1911 through Richard Nixon in the 1970s—but it has also been a pivotal location in Tennessee politics. It was the flashpoint of Tennessee's women's suffrage movement, and Edward H. "Boss" Crump made it the headquarters of his political machine.

From the beginning, fine dining has been a big part of the Hermitage experience. The hotel's original restaurant, called The Grille Room, was famous in its own right. From 1929 to 1945, the Francis Craig Orchestra held court there and in the adjacent Oak Bar. For 12 of those years, their performances were broadcast first on WMC radio and then nationwide through the NBC network. Singer Dinah Shore made her national debut with the band from the Grille Room in 1945.

When the hotel underwent a \$17 million renovation in 2003, The Grille Room, with its murals and cornices restored, became The Capitol Grille. The men behind the restaurant's famous food are Executive Chef W. Tyler Brown and Chef de Cuisine Steven Hartman. Brown, who became executive chef in 2005, graduated from

Johnson and Wales in his hometown of Charleston, South Carolina. He says he takes the responsibility of carrying on almost 100 years of Hermitage tradition very seriously—in fact, it was one of the biggest reasons he accepted the job. "It's very important to me," he says. "One attraction for me was the history. And once I walked in and saw how beautiful it is, I was hooked."

Hartman, a Nashville native, received his culinary training at Portland, Oregon's Western Culinary Institute. He and Brown work together to create new Southern dishes for the restaurant's constantly changing menu. "Tyler and I have a very good working relationship where we get together and collaborate on the menu items and what we're going to use. Sometimes he has an idea, sometimes I have an

idea, and sometimes it's just a big brainstorming session." Brown says he gets inspiration from perusing old cookbooks for classic, often overlooked Southern recipes. "For me, that's the thing I enjoy the most," he says. The menu design is also dependent on what kind of fresh, local ingredients are currently available.

"Steven and I both love sourcing items—finding things that are off the beaten path, or finding the best of the things we know," Brown says. The chefs are big proponents of the burgeoning local food movement. "It was a bit of an evolution, but I think we really started focusing on it more about a year and a half or two years ago," says Brown. "We started making a point to focus as much as we could on the farmer's market." Now, the chefs cultivate relationships with several individual farmers to ensure access to the freshest possible foodstuffs. "The way I see it, Mother Nature does most of the work," Brown says. "We're really just enhancing it a bit."

Their "enhancements" have earned a reputation as being among the best in the Nashville area. Using Tennessee products, such as Niman Ranch pork chops, they create dishes that are at once familiar and fresh. But using only the freshest ingredients means planning is very important. "You have to be proactive," says Brown. "A lot of things will be flashes in the pan with very short seasons. Right now, we have a couple of months to use watermelon or tomatoes. But we have to be ready to get them, so we're maximizing that time. In early spring, we have several types of mushrooms that come into season. Ramps, which are wild leeks indigenous to Tennessee, you only have about a month to a month and a half of opportunity to use them. Being aware of what's happening and being really proactive are the key. There's no real witchcraft to it." Hartman says they constantly refine the dishes over the course of time. "When it's perfect in our eyes, we'll add it to our repertoire," he says. "It's good that we've worked together for a few years. Now where we can say, 'What did we do last year?' Then we can pull out some of our home run hitters." ■