

Highballin' Down Park Street

by Cliff Rames / photos by Bruce Wilson

HOT BRANDS MAKE
FOR HEAVENLY
PAIRINGS AT THE
TASTING PANEL / THE
SOMM JOURNAL
DINNER AT THE 72ND
ANNUAL WSWA
CONFERENCE & EXPO

A smorgasbord of delicious libations and culinary creations awaited me at Highball & Harvest, a cozy, farm-to-table, Southern-themed eatery, tucked below the swanky halls of the Ritz-Carlton Grande Lakes Resort in Orlando. Sponsored by Park Street and hosted by THE TASTING PANEL and The SOMM Journal, the dinner deliciously precluded the 72nd Annual Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America Convention & Exposition, a sprawling trade show with over 2,300 attendees, 270 exhibitors and countless examples of some of the hottest wine and spirit brands on the market. Call it Disneyland for imbibing adults.

I arrived ready to dive into the four course tasting menu by Chef Mark Jeffers, designed to accompany a selection of Park Street's premier alcoholic beverage brands, including Grand Teton Vodka, House of Mandela wines, Atlantico Rum, Kelt Ocean Matured Cognac and Mandarine Napoléon liqueur.



Thirty guests, including journalists, sommeliers and beverage industry professionals, attended the Park Street Dinner at Highball & Harvest in Orlando, FL.



Some of Park Street's new brands—Mandarine Napoléon, Grand Teton Vodka and Kelt Cognac on display at Highball & Harvest in Orlando during the 72nd Annual Wine & Spirits Wholesalers of America Convention and Exposition.



House of Mandela Sauvignon Blanc and Chef Jeffers' Kale Salad—the evening's "wow" moment?



The Atlantico Cocktail: Private Cask Rum, house Velvet Falernum, Cointreau, lime and orange.

Founded in 2003 and based in Miami, Park Street provides behind-the-scenes logistical support to an array of clients, from craft distillers to centuries-old family businesses and award-winning wineries, and represents over 1,000 brands.

"Our mission is to help companies build and manage successful brands by offering innovative back-office solutions and exceptional service," explained Dr. Harry Kohlmann, the company's CEO, raising a frosty glass containing the evening's first drink—the Grand Teton Cocktail. "Tonight is about highlighting a few of these exciting new brands and showcasing their quality, diversity and food friendliness."

Paired with smoked trout deviled eggs and Chef Jeffers' house-made peppered molasses beef jerky, the cocktail was a delightful blend of house blood orangello, lemon and grapefruit juices, dill and Grand Teton Vodka. The result was a refreshingly clean, brightly citrus and off-dry sipper that tamed the rich creaminess of the eggs and sweet smoke of the moist jerky, cleansing the palate and finishing with a spicy orange flourish.

"I never would have thought to put something like deviled eggs or jerky on a tasting menu," noted Chad Watkins, consultant for Gary's Wine & Marketplace and founder of "But these pairings worked quite well—they were fresh and well-balanced."

Next on the menu was a fabulous kale salad paired with the lassy House of Mandela Thembu 2014 Sauvignon Blanc, a stainless steel, crisp and mineral wine from Swartland, South Africa, whose label depicts the pattern designs of shirts famously worn by Nelson Mandela. Crunchy with toasted quinoa, apples, bacon, pecans, golden raisins and herb vinaigrette, the salad was a revelation—multi-textured and succulent, the sweetness of the fruit and dressing offset the kale's bitterness, while the apples reflected green notes and the savory bacon gave bloom to a smoky minerality woven in the wine's finish. It was the evening's "wow" moment, according to Ted Carmon, Spirits Buyer for BevMo!, a California-based retailer with nearly 150 outlets.

EVENT RECAP

"The Sauvignon Blanc was beautifully balanced and aromatic, not in a grassy, New Zealand way but classical, mellow and tropical—in tune more with Sauvignon Blanc from Burgundy's St. Bris appellation," observed Jeff Salidor, Director of Sales for Arctic Beverages, importer of House of Mandela wines.

For the "Supper Plates" portion of the menu, Chef Jeffers offered a choice of blackened grouper or honey-lime skirt steak, paired with the Atlantico Rum cocktail and House of Mandela 2012 Royal Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, respectively.

Atlantico Private Cask Rum is produced in the Dominican Republic from a blend of cane juice and molasses rums aged up to 25 years. Evoking the flavors of the Caribbean, the smoky, bittersweet notes of the cocktail, together with the warm spiciness of the grouper, transported me on the pulse of a merengue song to the golden shores of an island paradise (the sight of palm trees swaying in the amber glow of the setting sunlight just outside the restaurant helped to illuminate my fantasy).

"All the cocktails were terrific, but the one that stood out was the Atlantico," echoed Carmon. "The richness of rum and the creaminess of the house Velvet Falernum really meshed with the blackening spices on the grouper. Yet it was bold enough to cut through the seasoning, while the citrus notes nicely prepared the palate for the next bite."

Opaque and opulent, the House of Mandela Cabernet Sauvignon displayed a depth and structure that complemented the many dimensions (marinated beef, grilled corn and tomato salad, potato purée and mango cilantro vinaigrette) of the entrée. "I am so satisfied," said Salidor. "Chef Jeffers methodically and perfectly paired the spirits and wines with these dishes. The sweet char flavors of the steak elevated the richness and beauty of the IOM Cabernet, highlighting its cassis, vanilla and tobacco notes."

Our palates abuzz with multi-sensory glee, dessert arrived in all its decadent glory: Warm chocolate cake served with stewed cherries, buttery pecan crumble and Georgia peach sorbet. For the pairing, Kelt VSOP Grande Champagne Cognac was artfully blended with spiced pear liqueur, cacao, raspberries and lemon to create a cocktail that wrapped the gustatory experience in cozy comfort. "It tastes like Christmas!" someone exclaimed. To wit, the Cognac's warm vanilla notes fused with spicy fruit, nut and chocolate flavors to reveal nuances of clove, cardamom and something akin to English plum pudding.

The evening's final victory was scored by Napoléon. That is, a rocks glass containing Mandarine Napoléon, a brilliantly amber, viscous liqueur crafted with 10-year-old Cognac and Sicilian mandarins (the story goes, it was Bonaparte's favorite drink, reminding him of his birthplace, Corsica). Bitter on the attack, it rallied lush flavors of orange blossom, vanilla and exotic spice to a sweet, tangy, lingering finish.

Scott Ota, sommelier at Arro in Austin and 2013 winner of Best Sommelier in Texas, noted: "The pairings tonight really brought forward the strengths of the base products, from the Sauvignon Blanc to the Cognac."

"It was an all-around great evening," concluded Dr. Kohlmann. "The food and beverage pairings proved compelling. This was an excellent opportunity for our clients to showcase their products to leading connoisseurs, tastemakers and buyers. While our focus is primarily on back-office support, this event demonstrated the front-of-the-house appeal of our client portfolio: high quality, innovative brands that deliver results and propel the dining experience to new heights." ■■



Brandon Lieb, Atlantico Rum founder; Dr. Harry Kohlmann, CEO of Park Street; and Ted Carmon, Spirits Buyer for BevMo!.



John Drugan, CS (left), Director of Food and Beverage at Ponte Vedra Beach Resorts, and Scott Ota (right), sommelier at Arro in Austin and 2013 winner of Best Sommelier in Texas, listen to a presentation about Park Street's wine and spirits brands that will be paired with Chef Jeffers' tasting menu.



Jeff Salidor of Arctic Wines presents House of Mandela wines from South Africa, whose labels feature the shirt designs famously worn by Nelson Mandela.