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D.C.'S EVOLVING FOOD SCENE



OFF THE RECORD

When it comes to Washington institutions, Off the Record, the bar at The Hay-Adams hotel, is at the top of the list, and its head bartender, John Boswell, is up there with it. Boswell has held his post at the bar for the past 15 years and has plenty to say about it, the city and politics.

He told POLITICO that the octagonal shape of the bar "tends to encourage conversations" and that "there are times when the whole bar will be in conversation," which the gregarious and opinionated Boswell seemed to enjoy immensely.

But the discussions aren't the friendly exchanges of differing ideas that they used to be. "I've seen it change a great deal since '02 and '03," he said. "That's when the division really started. In the '70s and '80s, you could have political conversations in bars, and people would disagree, but it would not become uncivil."

The political and social divide got to the point where, during President George W. Bush's administration, Boswell saw Democrats walk into the bar only to leave quickly because of the presence of a large number of White House

staffers and other Republicans. When asked whether he thinks it's better or worse during President Barack Obama's administration, he opted for better but attributed that more to the fact that "people are fatigued with the discord and arguing" than any mending of fences.

But whether the sitting president is a Democrat or Republican, Off the Record has remained a top spot for high-profile politicos on all sides for over 20 years. The bar's reputation for discretion prevents Boswell from dropping names, but it's clear that a who's who of politics, entertainment and business has stopped in for a well-made, classic cocktail. While Boswell enjoys engaging all kinds of people in political banter, his own views do slip through. "I try to keep it quiet, but it shows," he said, admitting that Bill Clinton is his favorite president.

Of the bar's patrons, Boswell said journalists and historians are always the most fun to talk to, and even those visiting from Hollywood — "We get the heady, cerebral types" — enjoy a good discussion. He likes to think of the bar as

a continuation of the salons of the 19th century and said a more apt name for the establishment might be The Five of Hearts Club — a reference to the exclusive intellectual circle of which both John Hay and Henry Adams (namesakes of The Hay-Adams hotel) were members.

Contributing to that feel is the bar's décor. Boswell loves the decades of political cartoons and caricatures that cover the walls. "I'm the only one who knows who all these people are. People keep trying to get me to write it all down, but I won't," he said. In fact, Guess Who? is Boswell's favorite game, and he thinks it's "great fun when someone comes in and sits near their caricature, and they aren't even aware of it!" POLITICO's own Matt Wuerker, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Editorial Cartooning this year, has close to 20 framed pieces at Off the Record. Other artists whose work is displayed at the bar include Art Wood and Richard Thompson, as well as some of Edmund Valtman's pieces dating back to the Reagan administration.

Boswell, who was recently out on medical leave, is glad ▶

to be back behind the bar and mixing up cocktails like Pimm's Cup and Off the Record lemonade. And when asked which is his favorite, Boswell gave his time-tested answer: "Whatever's closest!"

Off the Record is located in the basement of The Hay-Adams hotel at 800 16th St. N.W.

Hours: Open Sunday through Thursday 11:30 a.m. to midnight and Friday through Saturday 11:30 a.m.-12:30 a.m.

Phone: (202) 638-6600



Left, clockwise from top: The Hamilton, a upscale restaurant, bar and live-music venue, offers house-made fennel sausage and San Marzano tomatoes as well as a sushi bar with sashimi, nigiri and hand rolls in creative combinations. Above, clockwise from top: John Boswell, head bartender at The Hay-Adams hotel's bar, Off the Record, which has remained a top spot for high-profile politicos on all sides for over 20 years, said the octagonal shape of the bar "tends to encourage conversations." The bar serves cocktails like Pimm's Cup and Off the Record lemonade, and decades of political cartoons and caricatures cover the walls.