

BEHIND THE BAR



Head to the Islands: The Blue Paddle Bistro

Mixologist Combines Knowledge, Work Ethic

Bartender/Bar Manager Mathew Smith.

Head east on Route 2 far enough and eventually you'll cross the waters of Lake Champlain and find yourself in South Hero. This small town in the Lake Champlain Islands chain – home to fewer than 2,000 residents – is where the Blue Paddle Bistro first opened its doors 10 years ago.

In the ensuing decade, the renowned spot has welcomed hungry visitors in a completely unique environment by putting an emphasis on familiarity and personal service and redefining island fare – the island in this case being about 25 minutes northwest of Burlington.

"What makes the Blue Paddle Bistro different is that we have a very 'at home' feel here," says Bartender/Bar Manager Mathew Smith. "Our entire spin is that we are unpretentious fine dining. We excel at fine dining and great service."



**I don't care how long you've
been there – it's all about
the work ethic.**



That ambience is entirely organic. The building that is now home to the restaurant was once a minister's residence – and it still has that familiar bearing – but owner Mandy Hotchkiss goes out of her way to make sure the warm, welcoming vibe is maintained.

"She'll greet you at the door, maybe take a picture," Smith says of the restaurateur. "On any given night she knows 90 percent of the people in here."

Entrees range from a coffee-crust pork tenderloin and crab-stuffed ravioli to pan-roasted duck breast and lobster sauté. The bar menu offers quick – yet painstakingly-prepared items like eponymous Paddle Burger (a half-pounder with caramelized onions, bacon and Swiss cheese), Phoebe's Burger (avocado, tomato, onion, spinach, portabella mushroom and brie) or a memorable burrito with black beans, hot peppers and homemade salsa.

And while the bar area may be small, it's easy to locate – just look for the canoe. The cozy space is, again, very homey, with an upturned canoe suspended above it.

"Mandy once managed a canoe sales company and sold them all around the world,"

**Written by Bill Burke
Photography by Matthew Thorsen**



Blackberry Basil Gimlet

2 ¼ ounces gin (Smith uses Beefeater) ½ ounce simple syrup
 ¾ ounce St. Germain 5 blackberries
 ¾ ounce lime juice 3 basil leaves

Muddle the basil leaves and add the gin, St. Germain, lime juice, blackberries and simple syrup. Shake, strain over ice and serve in a rocks glass. Garnish with a basil leaf.

Smith says, "There's also a canoe over the register and a canoe outside with our paddle."

Spot the tile wall with blue mood lighting and you've found the bar – and on most nights, Smith.

How did you become a bartender?

"It started as a means of getting through college – Stockton University in New Jersey. Once I got through there I was looking to get bigger and better. I started at the Olive Garden when I was 18, and then I moved on to a fine dining place in South Jersey. I moved up to Vermont this past March and here I am. My girlfriend got a post-graduate fellowship here, and I commuted up for eight months before it got to be too much."

What was your first night behind the bar like?

"In my case, I was 18, so it was very interesting. I wasn't old enough to drink, so I asked a lot of questions – kind of flying by the seat of my pants. It was fun, though. I'd watch the other bartenders and ask them what they would do. It was intimidating at first because I didn't know much, but I've always been great with people and at multitasking. There definitely wasn't a moment when I was bored."

What do you like most about your job?

"What I like most is the people. I like being able to take the knowledge you have and then

show them something they may not have known about. It's building relationships. I want people to say, 'we went to the bar and sat with Mat and he told us about Uncle Val's Botanical Gin and it's our new favorite.' That whole part of it is what I like best."

Share a Behind the Bar secret.

"90 percent of the time, the guest has no idea what they're asking for. It's funny – someone might come in and say they're a Scotch or a bourbon connoisseur, but when it comes down to it, they can't tell the difference between Maker's Mark and Crown Royal. For the love of God listen to your bartender."

What advice would you give aspiring bartenders?

"Seniority means nothing. Your work ethic is what matters. I just hate that stigma where if someone has been there for five years they think they're the top. I don't care how long you've been there – maybe you have been here for five years, but you might be the laziest of all of us. It's all about the work ethic."

What's your favorite cocktail to make?

"Probably the Blackberry Basil Gimlet. I use St. Germain and it's delicious. I call it 'spring-time in a cup.' ☺

**Blue Paddle Bistro • 316 U.S. Route 2
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