



Front of House Manager/Bartender Tricia McDonough, Owner/Chef Claude Blais and longtime Bartender Dan Tolley.

Choosing Excellence

Cocktails and Cuisine Go Hand-in-Hand at Choices

Many restaurateurs work their entire careers to inspire loyalty from their clientele. It's part of the DNA at Chef Claude's Choices Restaurant and Rotisserie, in Killington.

"It's the food, the ambience, and I think the choices Claude (owner and Chef Claude Blais) makes," says Bartender and Front-of-House Manager Tricia McDonough. "His product and vision keeps people coming back. We have customers who were here on the opening day in 1986."

After a 20-year career at the restaurant, McDonough would know. Most nights, the Long Island-transplant can be found behind the large, horseshoe-shaped bar — notable for its striking, locally sourced cherry wood finish. The back bar was also crafted from cherry wood by the same local carpenter. A similarly designed wine cabinet designed by Blais holds 275 bottles of wine.

"The food is upscale bistro," McDonough says. "With the service, we strive for comfortable excellence. We don't want it to be stuffy, but we want it to be precise."

Diners can indulge in Blais's carefully considered menu, which features appetizers ranging from bacon jam chicken strips and bayou fried oysters to escargots Bourguignon and potato pancake Bar Harbor — accompanied by Duck Trap smoked salmon, onions, capers and sour cream. Entrees include filet mignon, rack of lamb Persille and seared salmon, among many other expertly prepared items. (The name, "Choices," was a natural, given the diverse, extensive menu.)

"He's very passionate about his product," McDonough says of Blais — a true locavore before the word was popularized. "He cares about every dish. The focus here is about food, and I try to compliment it with wine and cocktails."

What is the philosophy of your bar program?

"I would say that we like to keep things varied. There's something for everyone here. We have a 70-item wine list with 25 available by the glass — which changes seasonally. It's really here to compliment the food. We have an extensive cocktail list that leans heavy on martinis and Manhattans, but with also a few unexpected things as well. We have hand-crafted drinks of different styles. Some are spicy and some are sweet. We have something called the Dirty Bloodytini that's made with Absolut Peppar Vodka, olive juice, and we make our own spicy Bloody Mary mix. It's chilled heavily and served with olives and lemon and lime. We also have another one called a Caliente Mama, and that's with Patron Tequila, jalapeno juice, jalapenos, sour mix and fresh-squeezed lime juice."

What do you like most about your job?

"I like the people I work with the most, and the clientele. I like how the job is different every day. There are rarely two days that are exactly the same. It's always changing."



Killingtini

courtesy Chef Claude's Choices Restaurant and Rotisserie

2 ounces Ketel One Vodka

1 ounce Cointreau

Splash of orange juice

Orange slice for garnish

Combine all ingredients and serve chilled and straight-up.

Share a bartender's secret.

"Bartenders don't tell their secrets. If you want to be a good bartender, don't tell your secrets."

What was your first night as a bartender like?

"I started out waiting tables many years ago and slowly got into bar positions here and there. I would say, in this town, my first bar shift was at Charity's restaurant many years ago. Then I went to a couple other places that are now defunct. I would say I was both nervous and confident, just because at any new position you tend to get butterflies in your belly. But in general, people are awesome. If they see you struggling, they're there to help you — whether it's the staff or the clientele. I overcame the jitters pretty quickly."

What's your favorite cocktail to make and why?

"I like making mojitos because they're seasonal. Right now it's my favorite to make and I've also been known to enjoy them once in a while. We grow our own mint in a garden out back here, and it's picked fresh every day. It makes it a very good drink. Anything you just picked fresh from the garden, whether it's mint or whatever it is, is key. There's nothing like fresh."

Always drink in moderation.

What advice would you give aspiring bartenders?

"The foremost thing is that organizational skills are your best friend. And also, kindness goes a long way in any pursuit."

What cocktail is Choices best known for?

"We have a lot of cocktails we're known for, but one comes to mind — the Killingtini. It's a simple cocktail, a blend of Ketel One with Cointreau and a splash of fresh-made orange juice. It's a simple, elegant, easy-drinking cocktail, and it's our most popular."

If you weren't in this business, what would you be?

"I've tried other jobs and other pursuits prior to working in restaurants, and I kind of feel like the restaurant and bar business embraced me more than anything else. It's such a big part of that — I've always been a nocturnal person, whereas a lot of other professions are not geared that way. But this one is, so I've always felt more comfortable doing this." ☒

**Chef Claude's Choices
Restaurant and Rotisserie**
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