

### DC Coast

1401 K Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-216-5988  
www.dccoast.com

**Owners** Gus DiMillo, David Wizenberg, and Chef Jeff Tunks  
**Wine-and-Beverage Director** Scott Clime

**General Manager** Ryan McCarthy

**Head Bartender** Colin Perkins

**Number of Employees** 85

**Bar Focus** Signature martinis

**Average Drink Price** \$10

**Signature Drink and Price**

1401, \$8.95

**Pouring Cost** 26.5%

**Average Bar Bill** \$40

**Gross Annual Revenue, Restaurant** More than \$5 million

**Gross Annual Revenue, Bar** \$500,000

**In the Well** Bowman's Vodka, Bowman's Gin, Cruzan Rum, Juarez Tequila, Bowman's Bourbon, Bowman's Scotch

# Maxing Martinis

DC Coast sits at the corner of K and Fourteenth Streets in downtown Washington DC, just a few blocks north of the White House, where the daily crush of lobbyists and tourists rivals that of midtown Manhattan. Once a derelict outpost, the restaurant's site now fits the real-estate mantra for success—location, location, location—and its busy bar is the beneficiary of acute business vision and timely urban renewal.

The restaurant resides in the historic Tower Building, an Art Deco classic once intended for a bank. But the market crash in 1929 ended that plan, and eventually the address housed a McDonald's, until Gus DiMillo, David Wizenberg, and Executive Chef Jeff Tunks rescued it. The three formed Passion Food Hospitality and opened DC Coast in 1998 with the mission of offering Washingtonians and visitors to the nation's capital a menu strong on fresh seafood and top-flight, value-priced beverages in a handsome setting. The partners chose the name to reflect the three coasts where Tunks had worked, and they gave the restaurant a big-city ambience. DiMillo remarks, "We wanted to make people feel like they were in Manhattan without the drive."

### Downtown Revival

The restaurant's success didn't come easy. At the time of the purchase, Washington was in dire financial straits, and the location had not yet realized its tremendous promise. "Everybody thought we were completely out of our minds to open a restaurant here," DiMillo now jokes, noting that Fourteenth Street was a favored cruising spot for prostitutes. "Every night at 8:00 p.m., they'd all come walking past the restaurant." He feared they would scare away the clientele.



in  
Downtown  
DC

## 1401

By Scott Clime, wine-and-beverage director, DC Coast

*The specialty-drinks menu at DC Coast is long on martinis. Clime named the bar's signature martini after the restaurant's address.*

### Granulated sugar

1½ oz Absolut Mandarin Vodka

½ oz triple sec

½ oz orange juice

1 oz mango puree

Lemon-peel spiral for garnish

Coat the rim of a chilled martini glass with sugar. Combine the vodka, triple sec, orange juice, and mango puree in an ice-filled shaker. Shake until chilled, and strain into the sugar-rimmed martini glass. Garnish with a lemon-peel spiral.



DiMillo and his partners hired Simone Rathlé's public relations firm, Simone Ink, to represent them. Rathlé cultivated people who knew Chef Jeff Tunks from an earlier stint in the city. The marketing strategy worked—the restaurant opened with a ready-made home crowd.

A new mayor, Tony Williams, engineered the city's turnaround, and DC Coast reflects the downtown transformation. "DC is a renaissance city of restaurants and hotels and everything you can think of," DiMillo says with pride.

### Thriving Bar Scene

Scott Clime has been the company's wine-and-beverage director for four years. He builds the wine list, develops the drinks, and trains the bartenders and waitstaff. Clime doesn't employ a sommelier, but he does have a skilled and personable head bartender, Colin Perkins.

"A great gathering place, a place to be seen," is how Clime describes the bar, which occupies a central location in front of a window. "We serve a lot of lobbyists for lunch, and lobbyists are big for the happy hour—especially martinis and appetizers. The bar is full at 5:30 and stays busy until 9:30 or 10:00. Customers often have a drink at the bar before dinner and return for another after dinner." The most popular drink? "The Grey Goose Martini, up, three olives," Clime offers without hesitation, noting that despite the drink's higher 33 percent pour cost, "it outsells the others two to one."

The bar also attracts a crowd because the martini prices are low. Nearby bars charge \$12 to \$15, but DC Coast keeps the price under \$10. Clime notes that 60 percent of the drinks sold at the bar are martinis, adding, "We offer a great drink at a great price. Yes, our pour costs run a little high; we make it up on our well cocktails and on volume, mainly from our banquets and 29 by-the-glass offerings." Wine glass sales account for 30 to 40 percent of total bar revenue, and for by-the-glass patrons, cheese plates are a popular complementary purchase.

Dining at the well-positioned bar accounts for an important share of DC Coast's revenue. Clime estimates that 30 percent of bar customers also stay for a meal. "The bar fills up at lunch on a daily basis," comments DiMillo. "We have people who eat here Monday through Friday." But the crowd changes at night; Clime observes, "We get a lot of hotel business—a lot of single diners at night who like to eat at the bar."

Bartenders mix and serve drinks, but they also have to understand the menu to suggest beverage pairings. "Bartenders are trained just like servers," DiMillo explains. "Someone at the bar may order the smoked lobster one day, then come back the next day and order the same thing at a table. They should have the exact same experience."



Head Bartender Colin Perkins mixes wit, wisdom, and many marvelous martinis in his post at the well-visited Washington watering hole.

## Training and Benefits Payoff

To help ensure seamless service throughout DC Coast, Clime leads a staff seminar every Saturday. He personally develops these classes and particularly focuses on blind tastings and food pairings. “I have to become well educated so I can teach my staff,” he admits. The training payoff is immediate: Clime recently led a class that paired Sherry and Port with dessert, and sales spiked the following week. “The key is to keep up with the training. It’s all about repetition.” Sales are also boosted by staff incentives; the bar holds contests to reward those who sell the most specialty drinks.

Besides ongoing training, finding—and retaining—talented staff are also challenges. “It’s becoming increasingly important to make your training more detailed and lengthy. Five years ago, the pool of eligible workers was much larger,” DiMillo remarks. “Now it’s *hard* to find staff. We’ve been so fortunate. We have a very passionate, close-knit family.”

To build staff loyalty, new hires can buy health insurance at the group rate. After the third year, the restaurant pays for half; at the fifth year, DC Coast covers the full premium. Vacation time and parties for the staff and their guests are additional benefits that promote staff tenure. “A lot of [current DC Coast staff] worked with me at my last company,” DiMillo notes. “I’ve known some of them for 13 or 14 years.”

The restaurant encourages employees to learn new skills and even allocates a monthly fund to reimburse the staff’s

The DC Coast bar, just beyond the welcoming mermaid, offers the best spot in the restaurant to see and be seen—the ideal milieu for every Washington lobbyist.



education expenses. “We focus on keeping it bright and brilliant,” DiMillo concludes. “You always have to reinvest in your people and the business. That’s what keeps it exciting.”

## Milestone

The success of DC Coast has led Passion Foods Hospitality to open three other restaurants, each with its own regional specialty: TenPenh (Asian), Ceiba (Latin America), and Acadiana (New Orleans).

DC Coast will celebrate its eighth anniversary in June 2006. In anticipation, the partners decided it was time for a major interior renovation, which included developing a new menu. The restaurant will close for several days and reopen in time to celebrate its milestone. DiMillo, Wizenberg, and Tunks understand that even a star venue needs to renew itself to retain its competitive edge.

► Garrett Peck is a freelance writer based in Arlington, Virginia. He is completing *The Prohibition Hangover*, a book on the role of alcohol in American society since Repeal.

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—Gus DiMillo

