

FIVE QUESTIONS: Craig Wilson **Big Rock Chophouse Bartender**

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After 23 years at Big Rock Chophouse in Birmingham, Craig Wilson can speak with authority about bars during the holidays, when the crowd is at its best. Wilson began bartending there in 1984 when the restaurant -- set in a 1930s train station -- opened as Norman's Eton Street Station. And he stayed as it evolved into the cooler Big Rock, with a younger crowd and a more luxurious steak house menu. "The whole month of December is good," says Wilson, 54, of Clawson. "It starts the day before Thanksgiving and goes all the way through until Christmas. It's the best month of the year."



QUESTION: What's the mood and who's the clientele this time of year?

ANSWER: Pretty much they're in a festive mood. ... We have a lot of company parties here, and people are in better spirits. They're upbeat. ... You also get a lot of people coming in from out of town and meeting here, so between Christmas and New Year's, you get a lot of people congregating.

Q: Do you get more people ordering those ... well, froufrou drinks -- the sweet, fruity, trendy ones?

A: You do get more people looking for suggestions. We have a large martini menu, and they're always looking for something new and different. ... I like people to drink what they enjoy, and a lot of people like things that aren't as harsh, where the flavors are more masked. They like things that taste like they're drinking dessert, like the chocolate martini, and not vodka on the rocks.

Q: What this season's top trendy drink?

A: The pomegranate martini is the hot thing right now. We'll always have the Stoli Doli, which is vodka infused with pineapple. And the younger crowd is going for vodka mixed with Red Bull. ...They call it Liquid Cocaine.

Q: What's the average tip for a cocktail?

A: It's the same, about 20% ... so people leave a couple of bucks. People are a little more generous during the holidays -- and some are extremely generous. We have a very generous clientele at Big Rock.

Q: Do you have a special, gentle way of telling someone they've had enough?

A: I just basically say I care about them and want them to go home in one piece. And the best thing is, I have to do it less and less because people are becoming more responsible, and they understand the consequences. They understand the ramifications of drunk driving are severe. ... So I just say, 'I care about you and want you to come back.' And people generally understand, if you do it in a tactful way.

By Sylvia Rector, Free Press Staff Writer