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At Driftwood Kitchen in
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Duke Bourbon is the perfect
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PHOTO: MARGARET SOSS

MEET THE BEVERAGE DIRECTOR

From Caracas to Las Vegas

RICARDO MURCIA PURSUED A STEADY PATH TO BELLAGIO

by Liza B. Zimmerman

Growing up in Caracas, Venezuela, Ricardo Murcia's father wanted him to go into a "responsible profession." Despite the family's many ties to the hotel and wine business, his dad hoped he might follow in his own footsteps and become an engineer. Needless to say once he was appointed Assistant Director of Beverage of the 3,933-room Bellagio in Las Vegas, his family has never been prouder of his career path.

He grew up drinking wine and his history behind the bar started at the age of 16. Sharing food and wine at table was a special time for his large family—28 cousins, 11 uncles and counting—to get together. Ricardo, as a only child, was in heaven.

Family Ties and a Learning Curve

His uncle was a general manager in a hotel and got him a job in the kitchen. The job didn't work for Ricardo as he had little interaction with his guests. "You don't get to see customers and enjoy what you make." As soon as he got behind a bar, he "was the first in and the last out," he says with a grin. It was all about the customer's smile and the cocktail "wow factor."

His sweet tooth and upbringing in the land of fruity drinks hadn't prepared him for the spirit diversity of international bars. So he admits that it took him a long time to understand scotch. He also felt that Venezuela was too small a restaurant and bar community and headed to the United States almost 15 years ago with \$500 in his pocket.

He ended up washing dishes in Nelsonville, Ohio—population approximately 5,000—with a scholarship. "There's not much of a cocktail culture in Ohio and it's too cold," he concludes. So he headed to warmer climes. He did stints at the InterContinental, Crowne Plaza and Fontainebleau Hotels. He also attended Florida International University on a scholarship from Southern Wine & Spirits. "I wanted to have different experiences, such as closing and opening a restaurant, running a nightclub and working in a free-standing restaurant."

The Move West

In 2012, a friend of his applied for a position in Las Vegas, which piqued his curiosity. He came out to interview for a position with Bellagio that same year. He says that he was a nervous wreck, crediting mixologist Tony Abou-Ganim with majorly upping the hotel drinks program ante by putting together a large-scale, high-end cocktail program when he opened the property in 1998.

The hotel didn't follow up with Ricardo for two months, but he eventually got the job and landed in Las Vegas in October of 2012. He had never worked in a casino, much less an almost 4,000-room hotel. Miami properties topped out at



Ricardo Murcia mixes cocktails during brunch at Bellagio in Las Vegas.

the 1,500-guest level. He also had no background in gaming.

Today, eight managers and 350 cocktail servers and bartenders report to him. His top focus is leading the hotel's drink program is to create balanced cocktails. Stunning and unique garnishes are also of paramount importance. A drink he made for Tony Abou-Ganim's recent "For the Love of Cocktails" fundraiser this February featured a candy heart to help guests celebrate Valentine's weekend. It also showed his skill in showcasing molecular elements: a gummy candy, made of blood orange and Lillet Blanc, was consumed as the sweet element before sipping the drink.

Murcia says his palate has widened and he now drinks everything, although a Negroni is his go-to choice before a meal. He adds that he is proud to work with such a talented team. His advice to up-and-coming bartenders is to stick with their gut, take criticism well and pursue their dreams. ■■

PHOTO: AL POWERS, COURTESY OF MGM RESORTS INTERNATIONAL

