

ARTS AND CRAFTS

OR THINKING OUTSIDE THE BEER BOTTLE

Now that the dining public has mastered Beer 101, it's time to advance to more sophisticated ways to experience upscale craft and import brews.

By Elyse Glickman

While beer has endured throughout recorded history, the way the dining public experiences beer has truly come of age in the past couple decades. Not too long ago, when many of our readers were children, they probably recall their fathers' idea of "pairing." This consisted of a cold brew enjoyed on a Saturday night with the guys. People who grew up in the Midwest, thanks to the presence of German-American and Central European populations, may recall the hearty weekend fare of bratwursts cooked in beer and fish deep fried in beer batter.

By the time many of us were in college and wanted to feel more worldly, we headed to upscale pubs and microbreweries. Venues like these opened our eyes to many rich, flavorful interpretations of fermented grain and hops from around the globe.

As palates continue to evolve, chefs and sommeliers, from brew pubs to bistros, are taking everything diners know about beer in exciting new directions, via innovative recipes with beer and the kind of food pairings diners have long associated with fine wines.

TEACHING CONSUMERS THEIR "CRAFT"

When it comes to how and when mainstream diners came to embrace the world of small producer craft beers both in the glass and on the plate, chefs and sommeliers from beer-focused restaurants around the country have different, but equally complex, answers to this take on the classic "chicken and egg" question.

Todd Butler, chef at Los Angeles' Luna Park, will argue consumer demand came first. "In this information society via the internet, cable television food channels and cooking shows, people are getting more information and are starting to think of themselves as "foodies," always seeking that next new thing, that flavor," he says. Bill Heckler, Gordon Biersch's corporate executive chef, elaborates and acknowledges the roles chefs and sommeliers play in introducing consumers, daring or conservative, to a world of beer outside the "Big 3" (SABMiller, Anheuser-Busch, Molson Coors).



"Beer has been around for a long time, and (food cable networks) prompted consumers to discover new flavors, experience new recipes and learn about beer beyond what they already know," Heckler states. "Along those lines, people started noticing and understanding one can cook for beer as well as with beer. As for the popularity of craft beers and imports, Americans are suckers for anything with a history or a unique story behind it, as this suggests the beer will be very high quality. There's the notion these beers draw upon things that have been enjoyed for decades or centuries, not a marketing gimmick that somebody came up with 10 years ago."

From Heckler's perspective, the increased popularity of craft and import beers on and off premises reflects a general larger trend where demand for mass-produced products are decreasing, while consumers are willing to spend a little extra on high-quality specialty goods. Craft beers, in turn, have benefited from the fact that consumers have easy access to information that has helped them understand what goes into the beer, how it is made and how to distinguish between different varieties.

Frank Morales, Executive Chef of Rustico in Alexandria, Va., adds that



craft and import beers are recession proof, and are growing in popularity at a percentage exceeding national average for other beers and beverages. "I feel the approachability of beer is fueling this movement on all levels," he affirms. "We're not reinventing the wheel, but we are noticing that people have realized beer education is less daunting than they imagined, and we do what we can to making learning about the different styles fun. For this reason, Beer Director Greg Engert and I tell staff to not over-recommend or over-sell a beer. Instead, we talk to guests to find out what they like. And not only beer but wine profiles, and from there make suggestions and go with what a guest will like."

"People are expanding their horizons and thinking outside the bottle when it comes to beers, realizing there is a great world of flavor profiles beyond the big three," concurs Kip Snider, Corporate Beverage Director of The Yard House, whose original location in Long Beach, Calif., sets trends and the tone for its other locations. But is also offers a greater variety of beers (250 plus) and dishes from Chef Carlito Johnson, which are unique to this location. "I think people are realizing that there is far more to beer than suds. The spectrum for beers is just as wide as wine when it comes to flavor profiles and what foods will go with them. Meanwhile, our staff is like the troops in the trenches, making things happen."

Benjamin Ford, Chef/Owner of Ford's Filling Station in Culver City, California, likewise has made some interesting observations in consumer habits. "The largest increase

in purchasing micro-brews has been the Latino community, which is contrary to what one may expect," he says. "In Los Angeles, we're starting to see a more diverse clientele (at Ford's Filling Station). Women, Latinos and many other new customers will come in with greater knowledge of beers than diners in past times. It's also interesting how sommeliers have taken on a more proactive role in terms of bringing beer into their beverage programs and understanding their approach to selling beer."

Ford adds, "Although there was some hesitation on the part of sommeliers at first, now we mandate our sommelier is as fluent in beer pairings as he is with wine pairings. For a lot of our major events (involving catering), we offer both beer and wine pairings with dishes being served. It's an opportunity to show people this is part of our gastro-pub concept." *cont'd on 20*



Photo by Elyse Glickman

SAVORY SAVVY: COOKING AND PAIRING WITH CRAFT BEERS

As Ford is credited as the owner of the first authentic gastro-pub west of the Mississippi, incorporating beer (mainly with brews specially made for his restaurant) into recipes is a given. He uses beer to create brine for the process of smoking trout. He uses a beer batter for fish and chips, battered onion rings and for various sauces. "There's one thing you can get from beer that you can't from wine – a sugary, molasses-y kind of flavor and consistency – especially from stouts," he says. "Beer offers a different kind of sugar from wine, which is why it works for brining. You can use beer not only for barbecue sauces, but also reduction sauces. I like stouts and porters for sauces, ales for batters and light lagers for when we want to add more subtle beer-like qualities to food."



Morales of Rustico also stretches beer to its creative limits, making beer vinegars, jellies, salts and brittle. His kitchen poaches, finishes sauces and anoints dishes with beer, but stresses a chef should be careful to have moderation, as there's a point (like cooking with wine) where he or she runs the risk of making flavors too overwhelming for the other ingredients in a dish.

At Kabuki, a sushi restaurant in Valencia, Calif., Yuji Matsumoto, the Sake Sommelier / Beverage Director, offers Saporro, Asahi Super Dry, Kirin and Orion (a craft beer from Okinawa) at the bar as the unique composition of Japanese imports brings a fresh dimension to the menu's flavors.

"Our beers are lighter, with a crisp flavor that goes well pretty much with everything we offer; not just sushi, but tempura, teriyaki, beef ribs and other dishes," says Matsumoto. "Japanese beers use a high percentage of malt compared to American beers, so there is a nice clean savory flavor that complements the food and cleans the palate. Diners are looking for something different when they go to a Japanese restaurant, and that also includes beers and beverages."

"I am very excited about craft beers because some of the flavor profiles of craft beers are complex and well balanced and fun to work with," says David Burke, Chef and Owner of David Burke Primehouse in Chicago and a spokesperson for Sam Adams. "Even when you use craft beer as a marinade, you don't have to reduce it. As beers get more sophisticated and more chefs taste them, you'll start seeing more beers incorporated into tasting menus and paired with different cuisines."

My role as a chef, in part, is to cook with beer." He asserts, "While I am not a brew master, I have learned a lot from Sam Adams' master brewer, taking what they have developed and incorporating them into recipes. Now, we have easily well over 100 recipes, most with Sam Adams, from appetizers to desserts and cookies and breads."



PHOTO BY ELYSE GIECKHART



NIGHTS OF THE (BEER) ROUND TABLES

The popularity of wine tasting dinners, not surprisingly, has opened both restaurants and consumers to experiencing beer-tasting dinners with similar dynamics, sophistication and conversation. In Pacific City, Ore., The Pelican Pub & Brewery hosts Brewers Dinners three times a year in which five courses are expertly paired with six different beers and most of the food is cooked with the pub's own Pelican beer. While each dinner at the award-winning restaurant has a different cultural theme (Spain, Australia, etc.), the goal for Executive Chef Piet Vanden Hogen and Head Brewer Darron Welch is to demonstrate how craft beers can be enjoyed with food from all over the world.

Back in Virginia, meanwhile, Rustico also stages "chef tasting tables dinners" several times a year, involving six or seven courses. Morales believes this elaborate production gives him and Beverage Director Greg Engert the opportunity to explore the potential of different craft beers, educate enthusiastic connoisseurs and learn from them.

"At these chef dinners, for that evening, you don't just get me for the evening but also Greg," Morales states. "We will teach you about beers we offer, and as the night goes on, the dinner becomes a round table situation. It starts with Greg and I tasting, cooking, researching and exchanging ideas for pairing. After tasting many beers to go with a dish, we pick one, and then alter an ingredient with the recipe so the pairing is absolutely perfect."

He adds, "Once the guests are in front of us, their perceptions and opinions become a part of our

education process. Not only do we explain to guests how we come up with the pairings, but also the beers' histories and why they fit so well with the foods. Their input educates us so we can repeat things that worked and improve other things that may have not worked as well."

FROTHY FUN: DESSERTS WITH BEER

As it ends up, so to speak, desserts are a particularly effective and elegant showcases for craft beers' versatility. At The Pelican Pub & Brewery, Chef Vanden Hogen is particularly proud of his Poached Pear dessert, which uses beer in several different ways.

"First, Oregon-grown Starkrimson pears are poached in Le Pélican Brun, a Belgium-style beer that has flavor notes of coffee, cocoa and caramel malt," Hogan states. "The pears are then topped with ice cream made from Le Pélican Brun and drizzled with caramel sauce and battered pear chips made with Doryman's Dark Ale, a dark brown beer with a balanced aroma of roasted malts and Northwest-grown hops. It is then topped off with chocolate hazelnut ganache made with Tsumani Stout."

This fall, Luna Park's Butler is rolling out a Butterscotch Brownie Sundae with Extra Stout Caramel Sauce, a rich stout reduction with butter and cream cooked into a caramel consistency. At the Warwick Melrose Dallas Hotel's four-diamond Landmark Restaurant, the perfect end to a meal is the "Adult Cupcake," a classic chocolate desert reinvented by its newly minted pastry chef, Rafael Torano. The giant cupcake made with Guinness Stout also incorporates vanilla gelato, chocolate mousse, chocolate sauce, a cherry and powdered sugar.

Perhaps the most daring desert, however, originates from Frank Moreno, who raised eyebrows with his Brew Pops, an idea born out of a minor kitchen mistake. "One hot day, we were trying to come up with an intermezzo for a big beer/food tasting menu and we tried to make something for a Belgian Lambic," Moreno recalls. "It wasn't cold enough, so I asked a sous chefs to put the Lambic in the freezer. When we realized it was still in the freezer two hours later, it was frozen. We tried it and it was sensational. When summer came around, we figured there would be nothing more refreshing than freezing varieties of the fruit Lambic beers. From there, we went through 19 generations of experiments and recipes. We came full circle with something that had a great texture and great flavor (achieved with) minimal manipulation of the actual beer. With the Double Chocolate Stout Brew-Pops, the early version lacked sweetness and a nice mouth feel, so we fixed it by adding sweet condensed milk that offered silky creaminess."

While the number of craft beers and the restaurants that love them increases, Gordon Biersch's Hacker sums up the upscale brew's appeal the best to an ever-widening audience. "Beer is about freedom, not a strict set of rules," he declares. "It's about having what you want. The last thing I want to see is a list of rules telling people how to enjoy beers, what foods they pair with and so on. Ultimately, there is going to be beer that you like and food that you like, and quite often those two will generally go well together." ■

