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Birch and Barley and ChurchKey's layout takes a concept used to great local effect by Wolfgang Puck at The Source and flips it.

GREG NASH

Perfect pints and flatbread

Birch and Barley and ChurchKey team expansive beer menu with sumptuous meals

By Elana Schor

Even the most devoted wine lovers — particularly those who lack the income to become a true connoisseur — will eventually find themselves torn, scanning a high-end list of unfamiliar yet pricey varietals and thinking: What I really want is beer.

At ChurchKey and Birch and Barley, wine drinkers will find that perfect pint. The two-floor New American gastropub in Logan Circle is reeling in a younger crowd ready to trade up from Bud Lights to something more refined and offering a seasonally inspired menu that boasts flavors designed to match the malts and ales.

The new spot's layout takes a concept used to great local effect by Wolfgang Puck at The Source and flips it. While Puck serves his casual menu on the bottom floor, leaving well-heeled patrons to navigate a loud lounge before getting to the second-floor fine-dining room, Birch and Barley (the more upscale of the two)

is separated from ChurchKey (the capophonous bar) by a long flight of stairs.

But Neighborhood Restaurant Group (NRG), which scored hits in Northern Virginia with Tallula and Vermilion before venturing into Northwest D.C., had the good sense to leave some common threads between the two dining rooms, not least of which is the 500-strong brew list developed by "beer director" Greg Engert.

Engert groups his 50 draught beers as sommeliers would present fine wines, under headings of "crisp," "smoke," "tart and funky" and other flavor buzzwords. Sorting through such an embarrassment of riches requires a skilled

guide, and the servers, thankfully, have been trained to break down even the most obscure terminology (How is a Munich lager different from a German pilsner?) while suggesting food selections that match the alcohol.

Speaking of food, NRG's second great decision was recruiting Kyle Bailey, barely 30 but already a veteran of the New York culinary institution Blue Hill, where President Barack Obama

took the first lady for a recent date night. Any chef knows how to mingle spices and sauces with the notes of a great wine, but Bailey has taken the same approach to artisanal, often offbeat beers — to impressive effect.

A stellar fennel salad, for example, teases out the sweet notes in a hoppy pint of Amish pale ale by tossing on a vinaigrette of violet mustard and a generous heap of bitter arugula. Buried slices of blood orange complete the duel of flavors.

Biting into a flatbread of crispy prosciutto and port-glazed figs, shining like garnets on a blue-veined bed of warm Gorgonzola, is so intense that the pairing of smooth Belgian Kasteel Tripel beer seems almost too subtle ... until a glance at the menu reveals that the citrusy Kasteel is a whopping 11 percent alcohol.

That's the magic of Bailey's menus. Unlike typical American pub food, his dishes aren't designed to stay in the background during a few good pints.

Nor is the décor. Upstairs at ChurchKey, light fixtures both medieval and rococo cast a nearly romantic glow onto padded banquettes in mustard and beer-inspired hues. The back room is festooned with metal kegs, which don't

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