



Best Beer Bar
Birch & Barley
Washington D.C.

Engert pours a beer at
Birch & Barley

Some may argue that Washington, D.C. is not a big beer town, but don't suggest that to Greg Engert. As proof, the passionate beer director at the duo of brew-centric bars in the District's thriving 14th Street neighborhood will throw down the selection of fifty drafts, five hundred bottles and fifteen rotating cask ales—and cite the line of thirsty hop-heads that routinely snakes around the block on busy evenings.

The venues were opened in October of 2009 by the Neighborhood Restaurant Group and share the same roof and impressive selection of suds. But each has its own space, with individual food menus and ambiance. Upstairs, ChurchKey blends industrial and Victorian elements. Exposed ducts and steel beams co-exist with sumptuous sofas and velvet curtains.

At Birch and Barley downstairs, the vibe is modern and minimal, with warm dark wood and flickering candles. The centerpiece of the room is the so-called "beer organ" that melds both spaces. Pipes are cooled with glycol to a lower temperature than the drafts that travel through them, assuring that they will be served to guests at the perfect degree of coolness—in one of fifteen types of glassware designed to draw out aromas and flavors in much the same way specialized wine glasses do.

Engert tirelessly works the tables of both floors to offer flavor profiles and menu pairings for executive chef Kyle Bailey's American menu. Current menu faves include selections like Cuvée des Jonquilles, a dry Belgian-style Saison from Northern

France. He recommends it with a Salad of White Wine-Braised Escargot—the beer's earthy and spicy notes both complement the snails' garlic sauce, and contrast their briny notes, he says.

"My over-arching philosophy is to first consistently source the finest craft brews in the world, with a nod toward uncovering little-known gems," he explains. Here, it's all about seeking out sublime flavor; profitability and cost control admittedly take a necessary backseat.

A highly motivated and well-educated staff makes a visit approachable for beer newbies, and challenging and intriguing for even the most seasoned aficionados, by making thoughtful—and oftentimes unexpected—recommendations. Weekly tastings and a 120-page manual written by Engert augment staff training. The list is categorized by easy to understand categories: "Crisp," "Hop," "Malt," "Roast," "Smoke," "Fruit" and "Spice." Drafts account for 70 percent of sales, with the remaining evenly split between bottle and cask ales.

Birch and Barley and ChurchKey have undoubtedly become *the* places to enjoy beer inside the Beltway. "I am most proud of the service we offer, from the high level of beer knowledge that spans all styles, histories, flavors and ingredients, to the knowledge of beer-food pairing and proper serving techniques," muses Engert. "Many brewers send us the coolest and rarest stuff they have. I like to think that if they only have a little they want to make sure that little bit shows best outside of the brewery." —By Kelly A. Magyarics

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JUNE 2011 | Cheers 35