



CHURCHKEY: AMBITIOUS VISION IS REALIZED AS DC'S VERY BEST BEER BAR

Without a doubt, it is one of the best bars I've ever set foot in. ChurchKey is not just one of D.C.'s best beer bars, it's our most important bar. The Brickskeller was ahead of its time when its lengthy beer list made the record books. But Miss Havisham has had her day and D.C.'s beer scene has come into its own. Portland has the Horse Brass Pub and Brussels has the Delirium Cafe. Now, thanks to Michael Babin and Greg Engert, we have ChurchKey.

I'm not the only one who's noticed.

"I was very pleasantly surprised with the professionalism [of the ChurchKey staff] and especially Greg has a great knowledge," Mikkel Borg Bjergsø, the Danish brewer behind cult beer favorite Mikkeller, told me via email. Earlier this year, Engert hosted Mikkel at a beer dinner at ChurchKey's downstairs sister restaurant, Birch & Barley. "It is hard to compare [to other beer bars] as ck is unique, but it is definitely one of the best beer restaurants I have been to."

Then of course, there are the local awards (two Rammys and the City Paper's pick for Best Beer Bar/Best Beer Menu) and national recognition (Food & Wine, The New York Times, Paste, All About Beer). Clearly, the arrival of ChurchKey and Birch & Barley has not gone unnoticed.

It's never easy, or cheap, to open a restaurant, much less two of them in a shitty economy. Yet, Babin (above, right), co-owner of the Neighborhood Restaurant Group, did just that. Last year, he turned a former hamburger joint into a destination beer bar set atop an upscale restaurant. The establishments are treated separately, but are equally bound by a lineup of beers that stretch between floors and into the hundreds, all of which is overseen by a beer director that obsesses over every little detail. Needless to say, it was Babin's most expensive project, but it made Engert (above, left) a very happy man.

