

SCENE | By Kelly A. Magyarics

Suds Appeal

Washington, DC's Birch & Barley and ChurchKey Rev Up the Beer Offerings.

Walking down 14th Street in the Logan Circle area passersby are intrigued by the line outside Birch & Barley and ChurchKey even on weeknights. The sheer breadth and depth of the beer program warrants more than a look: five cask ales, 50 drafts and 500 bottles of beer and authentic cider, priced from \$1.50 for a four-ounce tasting pour to \$100 for a reserve large-format bottle. Sure, the proof is in the pilsner, but selection alone doesn't account for the crowds. The medley of malts at the ambitiously named Birch & Barley and ChurchKey in Washington, DC, is matched by inspired food pairings, a stellar vibe and attentive service. They are beer focused in a town not known for its depth and breadth of beer choices.

This duo of adjoining beer-centric venues, each comprising 3,250 feet, were opened last fall in this vibrant neighborhood by the Neighborhood Restaurant Group, which owns twelve restaurants in the D.C. area. Downstairs, Birch & Barley offers modern American cuisine in an environment that's organic and spare, warmed by rich wood, flickering votives and glass globe lights dangling from the ceiling. It's as friendly and casual as it is chic and refined.

The locally sourced and ingredient-driven menu includes options like a Crispy Duck Egg with House-Made Pancetta, Asparagus and Frisée (\$12), or succulent Braised Pork Cheeks with Stone Ground White Grits, Parsnips and Pearl Onions (\$24). Beer director Greg Engert is on hand, eager to assist with pairings. To say that he is "knowledgeable" about beer is an understatement: Engert's encyclopedic recall also includes details like the former occupation of the brew masters and which products they brew on certain days of the month. But he's accessible without being overbearing. Chat with him for a few minutes and you'll glean not only spe-

cial on flavor profiles and ideal matches for chef Kyle Bailey's cuisine, but a beverage-education lesson on barley, malt and hops, if you want one.

What I find even more tantalizing, though, is closing the menu and putting your evening in the hands of the pros. Birch and Barley's ever-changing prix fixe option matches five four-ounce tasting pours with five dishes (\$55, plus \$16 for optional beer pairings). You might encounter Arctic Char Tartare with yuzu gelée, ginger and basil served with Germany's full-bodied and aromatic Uerige Classic; or one of Engert's favorite pairings, Honey Glazed Duck Breast with wild rice, dates and radishes, enjoyed with Gouden Carolus Classic, a bold, dark Belgian ale.

Drafts range in price from \$5 to \$12, all available in the four-ounce tasting portions, priced from \$1.50 to \$6.50. "It tends to make it easier to sample some of the pricier offerings more cost effectively," he explains.

THE ALTER EGO

Upstairs, ChurchKey serves as the yang to Birch and Barley's yin, a bar and lounge blending Gothic Victorian with steely overtones. This is a sublime spot to sink back into a sumptuous couch, catch up with friends and explore a few pours while nibbling on Arancini—fried rice balls for \$4.50—or Poatine, a French Canadian spin on cheese fries for \$8.50. Heavy velvet curtains, chandeliers and wall scones meld with industrial elements like steel beams, elevated keg rooms, and a 55-foot bar, reportedly the longest in the District.

Though separately defined spaces under the same roof, with distinct food menus and ambience, the two venues share the same selection of quality craft beers. Anything artisanal and handcrafted that Engert happens to like could make its way onto the list. "I always want to ensure that we have a somewhat even spread of beers among the major flavor categories (crisp, hop, malt, roast, smoke, fruit and spice, tart and funky) that are representative of the myriad brewing traditions and locations of the world." Organizing the lofty list by these friendly



The atmosphere at Birch & Barley is warm and the tap handles don't feature brands.

descriptors makes it accessible to even the most casual beer drinker. Domestic brews, those from historically important brewing countries like Belgium, England and Germany, and those from new players like Denmark, France and Japan are all represented. A few of the most popular include Allagash White from Maine, Belgium's Kasteel Tripel and Gaffel Kölsch from Germany.

Five rotating cask ales like Joker IPA—priced at either \$3 or \$9 for 4 or 16-ounce pours—from Scotland's Williams Brothers Brewing and Oliver's Old Habit, menued at \$2 and \$5.50, from Pratt Street Ale House in Maryland, allow guests to experience the purest expression of the brewer's art, says Engert. Unfiltered and unpasteurized with no forced carbonation, cask ales are less bubbly and cold, allowing the taster to experience all the aroma and flavor nuances as the brewer intended.

Though many beer-centric venues strive for optimum chill, Engert explains that's not always, well, optimal. "We pour every draft at the temperature that will best accentuate a particular beer's flavors—42, 48, or 54 degrees." The pipes of the downstairs beer "organ" are cooled with glycol to a lower temperature than the beer that flows through them, guaranteeing that the brew will be at the proper chill when served to the customer. Bottles are

properly chilled by way of separate coolers kept at different temperatures.

Staff also gets their pick of 25 shapes of glassware including pints, goblets, snifters and tulips all returned to room temperature after washing before they see another pour (no hot pint glasses here). Engert's helpful strategies for managing the brew list here and at nearby Rustico include weekly inventorying and ordering, and continuous research on new and newly available products and their most reliable sources. The menus and the website are even formatted as inventory sheets—a nod to the meticulous record keeping required.

General manager Mandy Anderson finds the venues draw in all kinds of guests. "We have definitely attracted our neighbors and locals who want to find out who we are, but we also have a wide range of guests from all over Virginia and Maryland. The beer lovers are definitely impressed with Greg's selections."

Birch & Barley and ChurchKey's overarching concept, according to Engert, is to provide the absolute finest beer tasting experience to all guests. While the concept may be overarching, its skillful execution is undeniably not overreaching. *

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ChurchKey is a bar and lounge blending Gothic Victorian style with steely overtones.

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