

BEST of D.C. INCOMING!

FOOD & DRINK

BEST BEER BAR/BEST BEER MENU

ChurchKey

1337 14th St. NW, (202) 567-2576

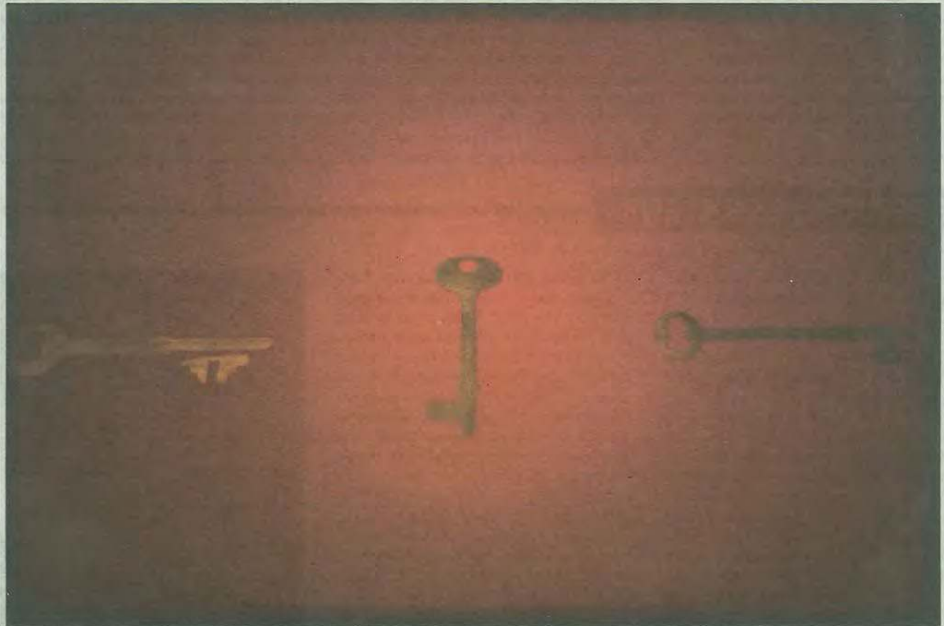
Honorifics alone cannot express the importance of ChurchKey for D.C. and for (I'm only partly exaggerating here) the United States of America, which right now is collectively discovering good beer, as if 300 million people realized overnight that there was juice beyond Sunny D, burgers beyond Big Macs.

With its ever-changing lineup of five casks and 50 taps, shelves of beer that stretch to the heavens, and a customer capacity that threatens to summon fire marshals, ChurchKey's import is its spectacle. Its bible-length menu hushes conversation. The bar is a cathedral to beer.

That's my highfalutin take on it, but you don't have to see it that way. If half the time I go to ChurchKey seeking rhapsody, the other half I'm there just to talk over a beer, maybe snack on something fried from chef Kyle Bailey's crack kitchen. Sometimes you discover a special beer by mistake.

On opening day back in October, I met a couple of would-be Blue Moon drinkers who, looking for something similar, ordered a round of beers off the menu's "Tart and Funky" section. I was floored when I found out they were drinking *gose*, an obscure style of wheat beer from Leipzig, Germany, which is brewed with lactic acid for a sour dryness that's somewhere between tonic and bitter lemon. This particular one, Leipziger Gose, was bone-dry, light at just 4.5 percent abv, and as refreshing as lemonade in July. I'd never seen it on draft in my life, and yet here were a couple passersby who stumbled upon one of Germany's most unique offerings.

This is the kind of thing that happens



at ChurchKey, where the menus crafted by beer director Greg Engert are practically syllabi, organized by flavor profile rather than country or region.

"Just knowing that a Berliner *weisse* is from Germany tells one little about the flavors to expect," Engert writes via e-mail, as that beer is more a cousin of *gose* than a relation to standard wheat beers. "Listing Berliner Weisse under 'Tart & Funky,' and under the subcategory of 'Delicate,' lets the

consumer know much more about what to expect."

When beer is brought to the forefront, you can't help but drink something good; it almost sneaks up on you. Engert's menu-cum-education program would appear to be having an effect on the overall beer smarts of D.C.'s population.

"This flavor paradigm has been helpful to assist newcomers to craft beer in branching out from the beers they drink

on account of marketing," Engert said. "Now those Miller Lite swillers are toasting stanges of Kolsch, and Blue Moon champions are tipping tulips of Kasteel Tripel."

Since opening five months ago, this cathedral, with its appropriately pious name, has dragged beer out of the fraternity and into the classroom, where the students are learning that expanding the mind isn't so boring after all. —Orr Shtuhl