



# BEER ORGAN



# RECITAL

**Bar Biz** PULLING OUT ALL THE STOPS, A DOUBLE-DECKER WASHINGTON, D.C. ÜBER TAP HOUSE AND RESTAURANT PULLS IN THE BEER-STALKING CROWDS. JULIET GLASS REPORTS. PHOTOS BY POWERS & CREWE.

When Michael Babin, owner of Alexandria, Virginia-based Neighborhood Restaurant Group (whose portfolio includes EatBar, Planet Wine, Tallula, and Vermilion, among others, all in northern Virginia), set out to create a cutting-edge beer program unlike anything else out there, he turned to Greg Engert, beer director of the entire company, and asked him his beer dreams: If

Engert could do anything with beer, what would it be? Well, first there was the matter of temperature. Hardcore beer lovers know how temperature affects taste, texture, and aroma—if you've ever seen people cupping their beer glass with both hands, they're likely trying to warm up the contents. At Birch & Barley and ChurchKey, NRG's new dual concept, Engert's wish was to extend this understanding

to a wider audience, showcasing beers as the brewer intends them to be experienced. So the two set out to design a system, ignoring the nay saying doubters. "The people who built the system thought we were crazy," concedes Babin. "They said this is a waste of money. It didn't give me much pause. Engert is extremely passionate, thorough, and careful. I had complete confidence in him."

Most places serve beer at an even 38°F across the board. Engert serves their 550 beers (including 50 drafts and five cask ales) at four different temperatures (42°F, 48°F, 50–52°F, and 54°F). The principle is simple: Much like wines, lighter crisper beers are



FOOD ARTS MARCH 2010

served colder, while darker heavier beers are served warmer. For instance, by serving Victory Prima Pils at 42°F, Engert enhances its pleasant bitterness, dry crispness, and strong effervescence. "Serve the same beer at 48 degrees," he explains, "and you've robbed the beer of its textural pleasure and you end up with something oddly sweet, watered-down, with weak effervescence." At the other end of the spectrum, Engert pours hearty Otter Creek Russian Imperial Stout at 54°F to release its fruit and coffee aromas. "If you serve this beer at 42 degrees," notes Engert, "you've frozen the aromatic compounds, you've killed the nose, and enhanced its bitterness."

Between the two extremes fall beers that have good aromatic possibilities and also taste and texture offerings, such as Brouwerij Van Honebrouck's fruity Kasteel Tripel (a Birch & Barley/ChurchKey draft exclusive), which Engert serves at 48°F to unlock all these features. Finally, cask-conditioned ales, which are unfiltered, fined, living beers, naturally carbonated with a creamy and soft effervescence, are served at 50° to 52°F; any colder snuffs the nose, any warmer and the natural sweetness turns cloying and the delicate carbonation vanishes.

The beer-loving public is buying Engert's beer logic, literally. Since opening in October 2009, Birch & Barley, a polished table service restaurant, and ChurchKey, the high-volume bar upstairs (with a nightly line to get in) have been grossing five figures a week in craft beer sales alone, outselling liquor and wine combined by four or five times.

Engert is also cycling through 10 to 15 cask-conditioned ales a week, typically a harder sell with lower profit margins (due to higher cost and potential spoilage). Indeed, most breweries making cask-conditioned ales can't keep up with Birch & Barley and ChurchKey's demand. "They simply don't have the cooperage," says Engert, who, in response, has purchased 55 firkins (10.8 gallon casks) for NRG's use for breweries to fill, ensuring a constant range and flow of cask-conditioned ales at Birch & Barley, ChurchKey, and Rustico (NRG's first beer-centric endeavor located in Alexandria; a second Rustico is opening in June in Ballston, VA).

All beer is kept upstairs at ChurchKey. A total of five different cask-conditioned ales are stored in custom-built coolers. Kept at 50° to 52°F behind the 75-foot bar, these are hooked up to five engines (hand pumps for cask-conditioned ale). Also behind the bar are four bottle coolers where 135 different beers are kept at 54°F; 270 types are chilled to 48°F; and 95 to 42°F. When ordered, bottled beers and cask-conditioned ales are hand carried downstairs from ChurchKey to Birch & Barley. As cask-conditioned ales have such delicate carbonation, a freshly poured glass inevitably loses some volume en route. To remedy this, each order of cask-conditioned ale comes with a sidecar of the same so that the server can top off the original pour.

Keg storage design presented a different challenge, since Engert insisted on taps on both levels. The solution was to build a series of temperature controlled keg rooms high up on a mezzanine in ChurchKey from which glycol-cooled draft lines (also set to different temperatures) transport the beer to each venue. One room is set at 42°F with 10 draft lines, a second room at 48°F with 30 draft lines, and a third at 54°F with 10 draft lines. The draft lines travel

to the ChurchKey taps via aluminum metal pipes that arc across the ceiling before descending to the bar, meshing nicely with the bar's Victorian-meets-industrial look (the work of Arlington, VA-based Hailey Design). Downstairs, where the interior is softer, organic, and more sophisticated, the draft lines fan out into a series of copper pipes flanking the back of the bar (aptly nicknamed the Beer Organ).

"It wasn't hard to design, just very expensive, costing well over six figures. But setup was half the battle," notes Engert. "Maintenance is the other half." The lower temperature of 38°F at which beer is typically served at inhibits the growth of bacteria that can give beer a funky off taste. "Serving it warmer, you have to stay on top of cleaning," explains Engert. All the draft lines undergo a full and complete cleaning once or twice monthly, and any time a new beer is put on, the draft line (about 30 brands are constantly rotating) is cleaned once again. Cask lines are cleaned once or twice weekly. Giving the same attention to the glassware, the bars are outfitted with glass sprayers/rinsers widely used in Europe to give beer glasses a final rinse and cool-down before being filled.

Supporting the beer program is an entire staff fluent in great beer, starting with the kitchen. Executive chef **Kyle Bailey** and pastry chef **Tiffany MacIsaac** (recently hitched and both late of **Allen & Delancy** in New York City) have thrown themselves into creating forward-thinking beer-friendly food. "At first we were nervous that everyone would just order the burger," says Bailey. "But they're trying everything. I think our food is just sophisticated enough, without being fussy."

Unfussy in no way means simplistic. At Birch & Barley the smokiness of Bailey's tender charred octopus with warm fingerling potato salad, tart pickled eggplant, and crisp fried capers (\$13) is echoed by a dry and roasty *Negra Stout* (Companyia Cervesera del Montseny, Spain). A honey-glazed duck breast and confit leg, nestled together in an earthy medley of wild rice, dates, brandied cherries, and radishes (\$24; also of Birch & Barley), complements a Belgian strong dark ale such as the aromatic and malty sweet *Gouden Carolus Classic* (Brouwerij Het Anker, Belgium), a house draft exclusive.

Upstairs at ChurchKey, Bailey keeps his savory offerings close to the venue's pub roots with chicken-fried sweetbreads (\$9), their richness cut by the bubbly and floral-spicy hop bitterness of *Pausa P.I.L.S.* (Pausa Café, Italy, brewed by prisoners). Flatbread pizzas include one topped with figs, prosciutto, Gorgonzola, caramelized onions, and Port drizzle (\$14), a sweet and savory tangle fit for an old-style ale such as Japan's *Hitachino Nest XH* (Kiuchi Brewery), aged in oak barrels previously used for *shochou* (distilled sake), thus imparting raisiny notes, subtle sweetness, and a touch of acidity.

MacIsaac's cleverly layered plated desserts for Birch & Barley require equally complex beers pairings. For the sweet cream French toast with oatmeal ice cream, bananas, and bacon-infused caramel sauce, consider *Founders Breakfast Stout* or a draft of *Aventinus*



Fugue in Beer Major: 50 custom cooled draft beers are conducted to the upstairs taps at ChurchKey (overleaf and opposite, top) and downstairs to Birch & Barley's copper piped Beer Organ (above). Opposite, bottom: Exec chef Kyle Bailey's menu includes stout-friendly charred octopus with warm fingerling potato salad, pickled eggplant, and fried capers.

(Private Weissbierbrauerei G. Schneider & Sohn, Germany), a *weizenbock* prized for its silky texture and overtones of nuts, raisins, banana, chocolate, caramel, and roasted malt (hello, bacon!). Upstairs at ChurchKey, MacIsaac channels her inner child with a "Hostess" cupcake (a simulacrum of the convenience store staple), a perfect companion for a cask-conditioned sweet stout enriched with lactose sugar, such as *Bell's Special Double Cream Stout* (Bell's Brewery, Michigan). Caramel popcorn, upscaled with salted cashews and candied ginger, goes swimmingly with the "corked and caged" (beer lingo for refermented in the bottle) *St Rieul Grand Cru* (Ferme-Brasserie St Rieul, France), a strong amber ale whose bright fruit is balanced by toasty-spicy malt, rescuing the ginger from a sea of sweetness.

"Usually it's hard to cook with beer in mind, because the options are limited. But here we have hundreds of beers that match really well with food, so it hasn't been difficult at all," notes Bailey. "The 50 drafts are so readily available and changing all the time, we constantly have new flavors to play with," adds MacIsaac. "With wine, you can't always try it, but have to rely on the sommelier's description."

To keep up with the perpetually changing beer lineup, servers, bartenders, and kitchen staff attend a nightly preshift meeting to taste beers and discuss food pairings. Twice weekly, Engert conducts hour-long tasting sessions and monthly, a two-hour-long seminar to dig more deeply into specifics. Supporting the knowledgeable staff is a menu that encourages exploration. Rather than being grouped by style, it's organized by tastes, flavors, and textures familiar to everyone (crisp, hop, smoke, malt, fruit, spice, etc.). That all drafts are offered by the four-ounce pour (starting at a palatable "why not?" price of \$1.50) as well as by the full glass certainly promotes lots of tasting.

Having successfully tapped D.C.'s unquenchable thirst for craft brews, Engert sounds off like a proud papa: "We really wanted to open up the guests' minds to the possibilities of great beer, but the coolest thing is the volume of rare, somewhat pricy product that used to be a specialty item, that we are selling." ■