

Beer's Place AT THE TABLE

Versatility and local roots make beer a good match for today's food trends

BY TERRI ALLAN



Restaurateurs are increasingly recognizing the versatility of craft beer in food pairing. At The Kitchen (above), which has three locations in Colorado and one in Chicago, the beer menu shares center stage with wine—and comes in at a much lower price point.

With the current trends in the culinary world ranging from ethnic flavors to seasonal and locally sourced ingredients to communal dining, beer—with its ever-expanding array of styles—is emerging as a popular beverage pairing for many of today's menus. “The food trends I see most are shared small plates with a focus on local and in-season ingredients,” says Andrew Gerson, chef and head of culinary programming at Brooklyn Brewery. “Beer’s versatility makes it an ideal accompaniment for shared dishes that may have contrasting flavor profiles.”

Ongoing interest in ethnic dishes, especially those with an eastern influence, also bodes well for beer. Scott Dolich, chef and owner of Park Kitchen and The Bent Brick restaurants in Portland, Oregon, notes that Asian food styles including Thai, Korean, Japanese and Indian are all compatible with beer. “Lighter lagers are traditionally paired with these foods, but the intense savory nature of Asian cuisine holds up well to IPAs, farmhouse ales and even sour beers,” Dolich says. “Some of my personal favorite combinations are the earthy and slightly sweet farmhouse beers, which pair well with Indian and Japanese dishes.”

With the focus on local ingredients in the culinary scene today, food professionals note that local beers often make the perfect companion. “What grows together goes together,” says Steve Jones, owner of the Portland, Oregon gastropub Cheese Bar. The venue offers 250 different cheeses, as well as 50 bottled brews (\$2.50 to \$29, sizes vary) and six draft beers (\$3 to \$9 a 12-ounce or 16-ounce pour). Rather than offering a typical wine pairing, Jones often suggests that guests drink Urban farmhouse ale (\$13.50 a 750-ml. bottle) from the local Commons Brewery with their fondue.

Craft Value

Not surprisingly, the rise in craft brewing is playing a big role in beer's increasing prominence as a companion to food. “Craft beer is changing how customers perceive the category,” says Kyle Mendenhall, executive chef of The Kitchen. The concept has three locations in Colorado and one in Chicago. “The most expensive beer on our menu is Mikkeller Nelson Sauvignon Brut at \$56 a 750-ml. bottle,” Mendenhall says, adding that wine offerings run into the hundreds of dollars. “Beer now has its rightful place on the table.”

Today's myriad beer styles have greatly expanded food pairing opportunities. IPAs account for the most popular style among craft brews and have emerged as the go-to accompaniments to spicy foods. Matty Melehes, chef de cuisine at Q Roadhouse in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, notes that the hoppiness of IPAs “counteracts the spiciness” of Indian and Mexican dishes.



The brewing industry actively promotes beer's role in modern cuisine. Brewers Association executive chef Adam Dulye (top) offers guidance on matching flavors. Beer dinners, like a chocolate pairing hosted by Deschutes Brewery (above), have won over fans.



At New York City's Colicchio & Sons, seasonal brews are a natural accompaniment to the rotating food menu. Dark and barrel-aged brews complement hearty winter fare, while popular farmhouse ales and saisons can pair effectively with many offerings year-round.

Indeed, Brooklyn Brewery's Gerson believes that IPAs can be quite versatile when pairing with food. "From grassy to tropical fruit notes, the hop profiles of IPAs highlight the subtle flavors of crudos, ceviche and sashimi," he says.

Stouts also pair well with a wide variety of foods. Adam Dulye, executive chef for the Brewers Association, points to the classic combination of oysters and stout, noting that the dark roasted flavors of a dry stout help wash away the brininess and "intense salt feel" of oysters. Dolich agrees, saying that Park Kitchen's shucked oysters, served with Breakside Brewing's Oatmeal Stout (\$6 a 14-ounce pour), is one of his favorite pairings.

Savory And Sweet

Food professionals increasingly cite complex barrel-aged brews for their versatility in pairing with dishes. Dulye of the Brewers Association recommends serving a barrel-aged beer or brown ale with roast beef, pheasant or duck to offset or highlight the malt flavors. Sarah Johnson, director of food and beverage at the Mandalay Bay resort and casino in Las Vegas, says that one of the venue's suggested pairings for beer dinners is ale-braised Angus short ribs with Firestone Walker's Double Barrel ale. A certified Cicerone, Johnson oversees Mandalay Bay's extensive beer program.

Deschutes Brewery, meanwhile, recently hosted a chocolate beer dinner, featuring five courses prepared with chocolate and paired with some of the Bend, Oregon, brewery's barrel-aged beers. "Chocolate isn't just for dessert," says Deschutes executive chef Jeff Usinowicz, adding that the sweet notes in beer nicely complement chocolate. "Cocoa has great savory applications in braising liquids for lamb or oxtail." He adds that the response to the November dinner, priced at \$65 a person, was "amazing."

Saisons and farmhouse ales are growing in popularity and are increasingly paired with food. Patrick Bennett, beverage director at New York City restaurant Colicchio & Sons, likes to offer Existent black saison (\$12 a 12-ounce draft pour) from Stillwater Artisanal Ales alongside pizza topped with house-cured duck ham, black garlic and arugula. "The crisp and slightly bitter aspects of the beer cut through the salty duck, while the roast malts echo the umami notes of the black garlic and the dark edges of caramelized crust," he explains. "This is one of those pairings where the whole is definitely greater than the sum of the parts."

Seasonal brews make for unique and timely accompaniments to dishes prepared with ingredients that are commonly enjoyed at particular times of the year. "During the cooler months, we feature pumpkin beer, barrel-aged beers and beers with a higher roasted malt content," Bennett notes.

“These are more intense beverages and pair well with the deep caramelized flavors of roasted winter root vegetables and proteins.”

As part of the 2015 Great American Beer Festival’s Paired event, Melehes of Q Roadhouse served Grimm Brothers’ Farmer’s Daughter Oktoberfest beer with roasted squash, ricotta fresca, sage and chili oil. “The beer matched up nicely to a dish filled with fresh fall flavors and textures,” he says.

In the spring, Dulye of the Brewers Association recommends pairing a saison or farmhouse-style beer with items that showcase the first hints of the season, such as arugula and peas. “Asparagus paired with a saison is one of the best craft beer awakening moments you can have,” he says.

Surprising Duos

In addition to classic and seasonal combinations, some unexpected pairings have emerged. “We tend to focus beer pairings around meat-forward dishes, but some of my favorite match-ups are vegetable-based,” Brooklyn Brewery’s Gerson says. “Roasted root vegetables with a bright vinegar-based chimichurri sauce meld beautifully with the caramel notes of a brown ale.”

The Brewers Association’s Dulye says that IPA is a good match for carrot cake. “The sweetness from the carrots works with the malt, and the fat in the cream cheese balances out the hops,” he explains. “That one always catches people off guard.”

Naturally, beer dinners provide the perfect opportunities to showcase food and beer pairings. A recent dinner at the Bent Brick, sponsored by the Kettle potato chips brand, featured a Michelada made with Gigantic IPA beer and spiced with Kettle’s Sea Salt and Vinegar spice mix. It was paired with Portuguese-style bacalao in a rich tomato sauce. Beer dinners at Dolich’s restaurants typically range from \$40 to \$80 a person.

Q Roadhouse, which opened in 2006, added an on-site brewery about two years ago. According to Melehes, beer dinners—scheduled four to six times a year and featuring the company’s own brews—have been popular. Dinners are priced between \$50 and \$90 a person for eight to 10 courses.

Culinary and beer professionals agree that staff education is one of the most important ingredients in successful food and beer pairing efforts. “We try to educate our waitstaff to be prepared with a range of pairings that will complement each

dish on the menu,” Dolich says. “With this knowledge, our service team can ask what beer profiles customers enjoy and tailor their suggestions to those preferences.”

Bennett of Colicchio & Sons agrees. “Much like wine education, beer education is part of our beverage curriculum,” he says. The restaurant hosts beer classes on rotation with other beverage education sessions and encourages staff to taste each new beer that’s put on the menu.

Balanced Awareness

Beer’s role at the table has improved in recent years, but Dulye of the Brewers Association believes there’s even more opportunity. “Many restaurants with 20-page wine lists and



Jackson Hole, Wyoming’s Q Roadhouse operates its own on-site brewery, which offers a full line of beers in a variety of styles. Curated beer dinners, hosted several times annually, draw in new customers.

well-executed cocktail programs relegate craft beer to the back page with the soft drinks,” he says. “Restaurants must have an equal offering of all categories to create a great experience for everyone who walks in their doors.” Dulye sees promise in the increasing number of leading culinary and restaurant management schools that are including craft beer in their programming.

Others say they’re encouraged that chefs in all types of venues are putting an enhanced focus on pairing brews with food. “Beer will continue to play an increasingly important role at the table,” Brooklyn Brewery’s Gerson says. “It will only become more prevalent as people realize its superior pairing potential.”

mw