


BREWPUBS ISSUE

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ELEVATING THE BREWPUB MENU

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Head brewer Adam Chenault collaborates with chef Matty Melehes at Q Roadhouse and Brewing Co. in Jackson Hole, Wyo.

ELEVATING



THE BREW PUB MENU

BY ADAM DULYE

Every brewpub and craft beer-focused restaurant is different—what works for one may not work for another. All brewpubs, though, can benefit from a renewed focus on sourcing, cooking, and serving better food to pair and enjoy with craft beer.

Thirty years ago, there was an assumed mass flavor to beer; there was also an assumed mass menu that went with beer. But the explosive growth of craft beer has brought massive changes to beer cuisine. As craft brewers continue to gain market share, it's time to see the menus that go alongside craft beer play their part as well.

Great beer is easily the most important cornerstone of a great brewpub, but it is only one cornerstone of four. For too long food, service, and atmosphere have taken a backseat to the beer. Many brewpub owners are realizing that change is on the horizon for the cuisine paired with craft beer. Just because a brewpub is busy today does not mean that business is sustainable for the long term.



This is not to say you should stop serving pretzels and start serving gougères. Instead, if this applies to you, stop thinking of the culinary component of your brewpub's offerings as an afterthought that all too often ends up as one-stop purveyor shopping, freezer to fryer, bag in the box, heat and serve, pre-cooked portions, or scoop-driven menus. Just as you push your brewers to brew the best beer possible, push your kitchen even further. An amazing community of farmers, ranchers, fishmongers, and purveyors holds the same beliefs as the craft beer community, and stands at the ready. An amazing community of chefs cares about sourcing, cooking, and serving better food just as the craft brewing community cares about sourcing, brewing, and drinking better beer.

TAKING STOCK

What defines your operation? Are you a brewpub that primarily brews beer and has a food menu that guests order off of if they are hungry? Perhaps the food is good, but you know it is not on the same level as your beer. Or does your brewery have a restaurant where guests come in to enjoy a meal and an experience? If people only visit for the beer, your brewpub is not operating at its full potential. If the food menu is not given the same attention as the beer selection, or if the service is spotty, it doesn't matter how good the beer is—the chance to create an experience has been lost.

The restaurant guest of today does not search for a great beer one place, and then move on to find a great dish somewhere else. They are searching for both in the same location, which means from the moment they walk in the door to the moment they leave, they are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and experiencing everything your establishment has to offer. Kris Oyler, co-founder and CEO of Steamworks Brewing Co. in Durango, Colo., sums up the goal best by sharing this comment from a guest: "We felt like Steamworks was throwing a party and we were invited."

So what does it take to live up to the expectations of the guest? What can we do to help this cuisine commonly dubbed "brewpub" or "gastropub" evolve? First, build the team. Bring together a brewer, chef, and

general manager and let them work with one mindset toward service and quality. "Find a chef who is passionate about beer and food together," said Matty Melehes, chef of Q Roadhouse and Brewing Co. in Jackson Hole, Wyo. As the trend of dining out is shifting to a more refined yet casual tone, well-trained, educated chefs are working with craft beer in the modern menu, in turn bringing a more crafted sense of cuisine to the brewpub kitchens that hire them.

MOVING FORWARD

If you decide your brewpub menu could use some elevation, one of the first tasks is to let go of the idea that if you change your menu, you will lose guests, and ultimately, sales. You may deal with some temporarily upset regulars and some nasty (yet entertaining) Yelp reviews that demand you bring something back, but forge ahead. Loyal regulars will sing your praises and support your changes and new guests will replace the ones that only have negative things to say about change. Once you decide to improve your menu, it's important to hold your ground.

Do not for one second believe that there is one sacred item on your menu that cannot change at all. Everything on a menu can change. "You have to constantly evaluate your menu and raise the bar in the kitchen," believes Sean Clark, executive chef of Steamworks. By constantly evaluating your menu, "You keep challenging your kitchen and keep the menu interesting for your guests. Our kitchen staff has, over time, become more and more excited about menu changes. It keeps them on their game and allows them to learn at the same time."

FRESH AND LOCAL

Creating the beer and food experience that customers are searching for involves keeping menu items fresh and changing with the seasons. Just as your brew team is gearing up for fall seasonals and winter warmers, your kitchen should be doing the same. If you're pouring a just-kegged winter holiday beer, Caprese salad should not be on your menu at the same time. If your brewpub is brewing the freshest beer in the community, why not use the freshest, most local products available for the menu?

LOCAL AND SEASONAL MENU ITEMS

Pulled from mid-November online menus

Q ROADHOUSE AND BREWING CO. JACKSON HOLE, WYO.

Carter Country Beef Tartare:

house-made potato chips, shallots, smoked green olives

Farro Risotto:

autumn root vegetables, pomegranate, red beet puree, wild mushrooms, parmesan

STEAMWORKS BREWING CO. DURANGO, COLO.

Pumpkin Ginger Soup:

topped with green chile, sour cream, and pepitas

Cajun Penne Pasta:

grilled Redbird Farms chicken breast, Gosar Ranch andouille sausage, poblano peppers, onion, Cajun cream sauce

For the team at Q Roadhouse, keeping things fresh means working with only a few short months of growing season in the Tetons. During the summer season, their menu showcases the bounty of the local farms' harvest, and when the winter months arrive they adjust their menu to support what their local farms and ranches can provide without sacrificing the depth of the menu or the quality of ingredients.

Kyle Mendenhall, executive chef for The Kitchen in Boulder, Colo. adds, "I push my chefs to take the same approach to fall and winter as they do spring. Get excited about finding new techniques for root vegetables, cabbages, potatoes, and winter squashes. You have to be excited that you're not going to eat a tomato."

Just as brewers go to the hop fields for hop selection, chefs should be going out to farms for produce selection. But can sourcing local farm fresh items be cost effective as well? Many brewpub owners worry that bringing in new purveyors growing the highest quality sustainable ingredients will drive food costs uncontrollably high. Controlling costs is one of the many roles a chef must excel at outside of simply being able to cook.

“Find a chef who is passionate about beer and food together.”

—Matty Melehes, *chef*,
Q Roadhouse and Brewing Co.,
Jackson Hole, Wyo.

“Start small, and do what you can. Find one farmer or one rancher and bring in their products where you can on the menu,” recommends Melehes.

Clark suggests partnering with local farms and working with them “to get as close to wholesale cost as you can. Farmers welcome volume purchases from restaurants, especially during a busy harvest season.”

While it's inevitable that some of your prices will increase as your costs do, you can carefully construct a menu that offers guests a full range of price options. When you do bring in local products, “it becomes something special to market to guests,” says Clark.

Many restaurants choose to highlight the purveyors they work with, and in today's lo-cavore movement, most guests are inclined to try something new if it has local significance or a special connection to the establishment. Be sure to list the farms, ranches, and purveyors you are proud to work with on your menu, and train your staff so that they can communicate that information to guests.

FINDING A RHYTHM

As soon as you begin making positive changes, your quality will increase, your guests will truly enjoy the story of your food, and you will be empowered to keep raising the bar.

How do you execute menu changes? A good rule of thumb for a brewpub menu is to have no fewer than 15 and no more than 25 menu items. Change items in small batches of three to five items at a time, with a space of at least two weeks to one month in between changes. The larger the menu, the more challenging it becomes to keep your costs down and quality up.

“One of the problems facing brewpubs today is that they try to have as much appeal as possible and get led down this path of trying

to please everyone,” warns Clark. “If the kitchen has the ability and capacity to execute 25 items that cross-utilize ingredients without being overly obvious and redundant, then that menu works. If you're doing 25 menu items and in order to do so, many items come straight off a truck and onto the plate, that is a big indicator that you need to pare the menu down to what the kitchen can execute.”

Once you get the rhythm going and the consistency is there from prep to plate to guest experience, change dishes as often as you want. Once trust is built up in the community that your brewpub is truly a beer and food experience rather than two separate

beer and food menus, guests will come in knowing that whatever beer they are guided to and whatever menu item they pair with it will enhance their visit. No longer will it take a specific menu item to bring a guest in; the overall experience you become known for providing will be the big draw.

Adam Dulye is executive chef of the Brewers Association, where he uses his culinary background to promote the value and compatibility of craft beer and cuisine. He provides the culinary vision for BA events such as SAVOR and Paired at the Great American Beer Festival. **NB**

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