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GRAPE

Expectations

Wine to shine in 2009



● A world of wine is available at Cork (top left); beer-friendly cuisine tempts at Brasserie Beck (above); cocktails intrigue at spy-themed Zola (below).

Capital Options



An educated and cosmopolitan culture makes Washington, D.C. a drinks destination, whether beer, wine or spirits is the goal.

By Kelly A. Magyarics

Known for its impressive monuments and as the epicenter of the U.S. political world, Washington, D.C. proper is comprised of diverse sections, like tony Georgetown, the hip and eclectic U Street Corridor and restaurant-rich Penn Quarter. Across the Potomac in suburban Virginia and Maryland, towns like Arlington and Bethesda add to the district's vibrancy as a small, decidedly cosmopolitan metro area with a population of 5.3 million.

Although anchored in history and tradition, Washington actually has a transient vibe, with long-standing residents co-

existing beside transplants from the U.S. and abroad who are drawn to the area for its universities, government posts and high-tech careers. The metro area is geographically sprawling—the trip from Alexandria, Va. to Rockville, Md. can take an hour without cringe-inducing rush-hour Beltway traffic. So while destination locations lure suburbanites on weekends, the convenience of neighborhood bars and restaurants attract locals the rest of the week.

Although political power players do still strategize over potent Martinis in dimly lit, mahogany-clad steakhouses such as

The Prime Rib and The Caucus Room, members of both parties increasingly are attracted to establishments highlighting local stars and internationally known chefs including José Andrés, Cathal Armstrong and Eric Ripert, who have made D.C. a player on the food scene. The city itself may have a bit of a stodgy reputation, but its restaurant landscape is in fact fairly hip, even progressive; all the better to please its diverse, cosmopolitan and demanding clientele.

Hip and progressive also describes the drink front, where studied and seasoned pros are pairing craft and international beers with chefs' creations, employing a fierce focus on the well-crafted seasonal cocktail and offering a flurry of options for grape lovers, thus proving that DC's back bars don't take a backseat to those of other cities.

BIPARTISAN BEER AND FOOD

D.C. beer lovers have never been hard-pressed to find a good brew to sip while arguing politics, policy or sports, and bars such as Red Derby and the Brickskeller continue to offer a staggering number of suds. Only recently has the notion of pairing dishes with beer, and the advent of the beer sommelier, taken hold, however.

At Rustico Restaurant and Bar in Alexandria, Va.'s affluent Potomac Green, beer specialist Greg Engert's job begins in the kitchen. "Chef [Frank Morales] and I are constantly tasting new beers and new menu items in our kitchen and bar to see just how creative we can be," he says. The duo develops beer dinner events and six-course tasting menus during which Engert serves from his stash of rarities, including Belgium's Saison de TIPAIX, brewed only once a month, and the 1995 Xyauyu, a strong dark ale produced in the solera method by Birrificio Le Baladin.

Rustico also caters to the locals stopping in for a couple pints and a hearth-fired pizza at the bar. To appeal both to frequent diners and to those with what Engert calls the "beer collector mentality," Rustico carries 300 bottles and 30 drafts, of which a handful rotate weekly. Top sellers are Austrian pilsner Eggenberg Naturtrüg and Two Hearted Ale, an IPA from Bell's Brewery in Michigan. Both sell for \$3 a taste, \$6 for the standard 14-ounce size and \$8 for a large (16.9 and 20 ounces, respectively).

General manager Jason Asher hasn't seen Rustico's sales slow with the economy, and for that he cites beer's accessibility and affordability. "A great bottle of beer is much cheaper than a great bottle of wine," he explains, noting that guest checks average \$25. Neighborhood Restaurant Group, which owns Rustico as well as Tallula, Vermilion, Buzz, The Evening Star Cafe, Planet Wine and Star Catering, has two more restaurants on tap to open this fall, Birch and Barley and ChurchKey, their first spots in the district.

Meanwhile, downtown at Robert Wiedmaier's bustling train station-inspired Brasserie Beck in D.C.'s McPhearson Square, ever-present beer specialist Bill Catron holds court over the strictly Belgian selections. Catron was knighted last year by the Belgian government for his work with Belgian beers, and he's always on the floor at Beck, enthusiastically offering pairing suggestions to complement beer-friendly Belgian favorites such



● A broad selection of Belgian brews enhance Belgian dishes, including desserts, at Brasserie Beck.

as moules frites and choucroute en croute.

Though Belgium no longer maintains a position of neutrality, the appeal of its beers transcends party lines in Washington. "We have a large contingent of Hill folk from both parties, as well as past administration notables and newscasters," says director of operations Thomas Burke. Clientele has a keen interest in beer and food; the restaurant has exceeded its sales goals for the past two years.

One hundred forty beers are on the menu at Brasserie Beck, including 60 staples, with the rest rotated according to season and availability. Top taps are Bavik, cherry lambic Kasteel Rouge and red Flemish ale Bacchus, while bottle faves are Gulden Draak, Saison Dupont and the suitably patriotic red, white and blue versions of Chimay.

CommonWealth brings the English gastropub to the city's diverse Columbia Heights neighborhood. The pub's hook is to only serve brews that hail from the U.K. or one of the four American commonwealths: Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Kentucky.

While servers suggest can't-miss beer and food pairings, customers also are encouraged to discover their own—Lewis wants to avoid a stuffy or restrictive vibe. To encourage experimentation, patrons can choose from several beer flights from \$9 to \$12, which contain four 4- or 5-ounce pours. All drafts can be poured as a 10-ounce half pint, 16-ounce U.S. pint or a 20-ounce English pint.



● At Commonwealth, food items are designed to pair well with beers brewed in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Kentucky.

A major player in the D.C. food and drink game for the past 20 years, Lewis has seen administrations and dining trends come and go. The lavish spending in restaurants and bars, typical during the first six months of a new administration, invariably gives way to a slowdown—especially during the lame duck phase, or if a president’s popularity slips. In this uncertain market, casual, mid-priced locales—including those focusing on beer and its related cuisines—are faring better than more upscale spots in D.C.

COCKTAILS, ALWAYS IN SEASON

It’s an exciting time to be a mixologist in Washington, D.C. The area nurtures its stars behind the bar, and the brightest have created the D.C. Craft Bartenders Guild. Washington’s savviest cocktailians recognize that the process involves more than dump, shake and repeat. A few years back, Todd Thrasher set the bar for the well-crafted cocktail at Alexandria’s Restaurant Eve and nearby speakeasy PX. These days, sharply dressed drinks—both classically and expertly made—can be found all over town.

Adam Bernbach’s Tuesday evening cocktail sessions at Bar Pilar bring in regulars and newbies eager to try his innovative, weekly-changing menu. For \$36, guests sample a liquid tasting menu of three cocktails, along with an “opening taste” and an “interlude.” The drinks also can be purchased à la carte for \$11 and enjoyed alongside well-conceived small plates and entrées.

The keystone of a great drink, according to Bernbach, is balance: in aroma, taste, mouthfeel and aesthetics. Bernbach

says each session’s menus take approximately 30 hours to create; the extensive time is required to perfect such complex drinks as his Sazerac-inspired Skerchy Dude, which combines Glenmorangie single malt Scotch, a Cointreau glass rinse, Lillet Blanc, Marcarini Barolo Chinato, quinine, Peychaud’s Bitters and an orange zest garnish. Bernbach’s been perfecting his skills behind the bar for seven years at D.C. hotspots including Café Saint-Ex, Komi and PS 7’s, where he started getting serious about cocktails; he now revels in designing complex, multi-layered drinks.

Bar Pilar caters to a late-20s to late-30s educated crowd, with a smattering of punk and indie rockers. While some critics claim Bar Pilar’s drinks take too long to prepare, most guests know what to expect; verbiage on the menu thanks patrons for their patience. “It takes a strong focus on detail to produce a great drink,” notes Bernbach.

Fans of Gina Chersevani, who followed her from gigs at Poste Moderne Brasserie and Rasika, now flock to Arlington gastropub EatBar to sample her inventive and left-of-center concoctions, often developed with input from EatBar’s chefs. Cocktails cost from \$9 to \$10, including St. Pete’s Denial, made with vodka, Godiva White Chocolate Liqueur, Frangelico and blue cheese, and Daffney’s Fun Guy, which mixes porcini-infused Pernod, gin and savory, salty duck cracklin’, the crispy pieces of skin that remain after the fat is rendered.

Chersevani carefully toes that fine line between serving expertly made beverages and ones that just take too long. “The whole point of going out for a drink is to take the work out of it for the guest,” she says. “They deserve to be pampered, not made to wait.”

Crafting expertly made cocktails requires a “cooking approach,” according to John Wabeck, wine director at Inox in Tyson’s Corner, Va. Virginia is a control state, and the smaller selection of available liquors—compared to the district—forces Wabeck to slightly alter his back bar philosophy. Instead of highlighting 27 gins and several tonics, as he did during his former gig as mixologist at D.C.’s New Heights Restaurant, at Inox he strives simply to “buy the best and treat it with respect.”

A unique newcomer to the district is Hummingbird to Mars, the speakeasy-styled, location-changing bar founded by beverage consultant Derek Brown, Owen Thomson of Bourbon and Justin Guthrie of Central Michel Richard. The bar’s name refers to an ironic quote from Senator Morris Sheppard in 1930, speaking on the chance of Prohibition being repealed as likely as a “hummingbird flying to Mars with the Washington Monument tied to its tail.”

Not only does the establishment regularly change locations—it moves in a clandestine fashion from place to place and operates only two nights a week—its bartenders also rotate, thanks to a parade of guest mixologists from New York City who ply their craft alongside D.C. bartenders. Whatever the location or whoever the bartender, the bar’s common thread is the presence of drinks that showcase creativity, attention to detail and excellence in technique, such as Brown’s Summer Camp, made with marshmallow-infused blended Scotch, smoked vermouth, Fee Brothers Whiskey Barrel-Aged Bitters and a toasted marshmallow garnish.

Quality as it relates to seasonality is paramount for Guthrie of Central Michel Richard. "I see heavy, savory drinks on cocktail lists during the summer and it just breaks my heart," he says. People naturally crave what's in season, he explains, so any drink surprises at Central are technique-driven: handmade sodas, infusions, stenciled bitters on the surface or unusual garnishes like lollipops. Seasonal tipples range from \$11 to \$14, including his Baltimore Bengali, made with sous vide curried Jim Beam Black, apricot brandy, lemon juice, simple syrup and soda water, garnished with an orange slice and a brandied cherry.

Zola, the espionage-themed restaurant adjacent to the International Spy Museum in Penn Quarter, goes for pure simplicity. Ralph Rosenberg, director of operations for Zola parent, Star Restaurant Group, describes the cocktail program as "straightforward American, with three to four components elegantly and simply presented with the finest ingredients we can find." The Zohito, the fresh and vibrant take on the Mojito, for example, uses kaffir lime syrup and kumquats. Most popular is the \$9.50 namesake cocktail—Cosmo-like, but with white cranberry juice to appeal to both sexes. Last year, 25,000 were sold.

GRAPE OPTIONS

On the wine front, D.C.'s drinkers are educated and show confidence in their preferences, which hardly is surprising given D.C.'s cosmopolitan population and its distinction as the market with the largest per-capita wine consumption in the United States. Classes, wine dinners and embassy tastings sate palates eager to taste and learn. Wine bars are not a novel idea here, but their numbers recently have surged in Washington.

With 3,998 square feet of indoor and outdoor seating, Vinoteca in the ultra-hip U Street Corridor gives grape lovers plenty of room to swirl, sniff and sip. "This is a neighborhood wine bar, so we get a lot of locals," explains partner Diego Cerezo.

Each of the 100 wines offered is available in a 2.5-ounce taste, 5-ounce glass or by the bottle. For \$16 to \$20, whimsically

Old-Time Tastes

For the taste and feel of old Washington, patrons grab a barstool at the cozy and historic Tabard Inn, built in the late 1800s. As drinks maven at D.C.'s oldest continually operated inn, bartender Chantal Tseng specializes in the classics. Her perfectly balanced Martini features orange bitters, and her Old Overholt Rye-based Sazerac—though admittedly not a D.C. original—is regarded by many to be the best in town.

Colonial-era drinks also are regaining popularity. Although Tom Brown's current gig is at wine bar Cork, he's known to whip up interesting takes on flips and sangarees. Cocktail fans stop into Cork for drinks like Brown's Truffled Amaro Flip, made with Korbel brandy, Ramazzotti Amaro, eggs, lemon juice, truffle oil and Jerry Thomas Decanter bitters, shaken for quite a long time and worth the wait.

named flights such as "Bubble Bath" and "Italian Threesome" can be partnered with cheese and charcuterie—or more substantial fare such as sliders, bison steak or duck confit. During daily happy hour, 20 wines are offered at \$5 a glass. Vinolounge is the site of Vinoteca's Tuesday evening wine classes. The \$35 fee includes wines, instruction, a personal cheese board and a \$5 Vinoteca gift card.

The wait for one of 79 seats at Cork in D.C.'s Logan Circle can be grueling but worthwhile. "We created Cork because we wanted people to be able to explore and pair food and wine and see how both complement one another," says Diane Gross, a former Hill staffer who co-owns the hotspot with husband Khalid Pitts.

At any given time, Cork offers a by-the-glass list of 35 wines that's heavy on small producers from Italy, France and Spain; prices range from \$7 to \$14. Also featured are four new flights each month, with sparkling wines and big reds proving most popular. Sharable plates from \$5 to \$14, such as chicken liver bruschetta and double-fried French fries, invite guests to find their perfect pairing; checks average \$25.

At Washington, D.C. wine bars, the red and the blue meet and mingle over a glass of red or white. Both sides of the aisle no doubt would agree that drink operators in town take a firm bi-partisan approach. With all the talk about change coming to Washington, beverage programs here already are forward thinking and far from business as usual. ●

Kelly Magyarics is a wine educator and freelance writer in the Washington, D.C. area. She has written for Imbibe, Modern Luxury DC and The Tasting Panel, among others.



● Sleek Zola serves streamlined but inventive cocktails.