

Shaking It Up in the District

WASHINGTON BARS OFFER A **CUSTOM** CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

by Kelly A. Magyarics

All eyes are on Washington, D.C. right now, and it's not all because of health care reform or the economy. The District's bars continue to impress with cool concepts, incredible bar talent and damn tasty beer, wine and cocktails. THE TASTING PANEL checks in with three new venues that give guests a Washington monumental bar experience.

Hophead Nirvana

Beer enthusiasts seeking pilsner paradise need look no further than **ChurchKey/Birch & Barley**, two adjoining venues in D.C.'s thriving 14th Street neighborhood that offer guests a staggering 555 different beers. Downstairs, Birch & Barley serves modern American cuisine in a casually organic, sparse yet warm environment. Upstairs, patrons can belly up to the fifty-five-foot long bar—currently the longest in D.C.—in a Victorian-meets-Gothic atmosphere, with sumptuous couches, velvet curtains, chandeliers and wall sconces.

The suds program includes 500 bottles representing 100 styles and 30 countries; 30 unique and often exclusive drafts, many of which rotate weekly; and five authentic, hand-pumped, cask-conditioned beers. Beer Director Greg Engert is a veritable encyclopedia of all things barley, malt and hops, tirelessly providing guests with flavor profiles, spot-on pairing advice and fascinating brewery back-stories. All beers are stored and poured according to brewers' specifications, thanks to a five-zone temperature-controlled system, as well as Engert's sommelier-like fanaticism about proper serving temperatures.

ChurchKey's focal point is the so-called "beer organ," whose copper pipes carry the fifty drafts from second-floor storage straight to guests' pint glasses. "ChurchKey is our attempt at a truly great bar that emphasizes the epitome of the craft beer movement," explains Engert.

www.churchkeydc.com

**ChurchKey Beer Director
Greg Engert.**

PHOTO: POWERS AND CREWE



Vaults for Your Malts

Thanks to **AGAINN**'s 130 private Scotch lockers, your favorite bottle of whisky is both coddled and revered. A \$500 yearly rental fee at the modern gastropub, whose Gaelic name translates to "with us," includes use of a felt-lined, temperature-controlled storage locker emblazoned with a personalized nameplate, a restaurant gift certificate and a bottle from AGAINN's menu to jumpstart your collection (the venue touts over eighty whiskies, including forty-six Scotches, and each locker can hold four or five bottles).

The remainder of the beverage menu, created by Josh Harris and Scott Baird, cocktail consultants and founding partners of Bon Vivants, draws on the pub's British influence, with tea, gin, Irish whiskey, Scotch and even curry factoring prominently on the drinks menu of the 20-seat bar. "I love the 'old-school' style we are trying to portray, as well as the amazing ingredients we get to work with," notes Beverage Director Elli Benchimol, who gets excited at the prospect of turning guests on to new things. Complex, multi-layered creations include Rothman & Winter Orchard Apricot liqueur, Dolin dry vermouth and Madras curry-infused John L. Sullivan Irish whiskey in the Bare Knuckle Boxer; and Dolin sweet vermouth infused with Earl Grey tea for the citrus-tinged Yeoman's Afternoon.

www.againndc.com



PHOTOS: VINCENT GALLEGOS



The Passenger co-owner Derek Brown with staff.

Liquid Journeys

Like yin and yang, black and white or gin and vodka, bartending brothers Tom and Derek Brown are an intriguing study in cocktailian contrast. The two recently joined forces to open **The Passenger/Columbia Room**, near D.C.'s Convention Center.

The Passenger is Tom's playground, where guests are encouraged to order beer from a can (one of its two natural states, along with a keg, he says), swirl a glass of an off-the-beaten path varietal or suggest a cocktail direction to the more spontaneous brother ("spicy," "not too sweet," "something with gin,") and sip what comes out of the shaker while noshing on a kim-chi hot dog.

Younger brother Derek, the self-proclaimed bookish cocktail geek, holds court back in the more subdued, railcar-inspired Columbia Room, as well as behind the 20 seats at the intimate reservation-only omakase-style bar. The Japanese phrase for "It's up to you" aptly describes the latter, as it's here that Derek interacts closely with guests to make custom cocktails. "I take notes from small, Japanese bars in Tokyo but let people in on the process of making cocktails," he says. The exclusive inner sanctum stocks only a handful of commercial liquors; the rest, ranging from booze to bitters and infusions, are house-made.

www.passengerdc.com ■



PHOTO: POWERS AND CREWE

Private Scotch lockers at AGAINN.