



Restaurants and Bars

Pull Me a Cold One: The Birth of the Modern Beer Bar

Forget about the copper tanks and bearded dudes lecturing you about hops. A new breed of beer bar has emerged, with well-edited lists of brews and the kind of interiors that make you actually want to hang out and order another round

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May 2010

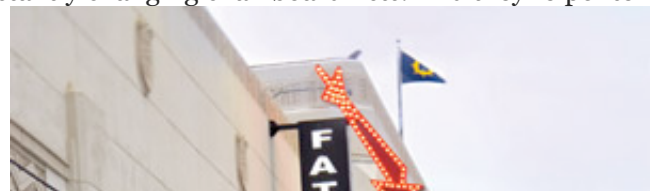


Poor beer. No matter how many people say how special you are—Obama, Homer Simpson, the homebrew guy with the beard at your local pub—mention "beer bar" today and you can't help but think of those cheesy '90s brewpubs that popped up with the frequency of strip malls. They had the right spirit, just the wrong execution. Those big copper tanks in the window? Turns out they were false beacons of hope. What you got were mostly overhopped IPAs or bland lagers that, after you gave one a shot, made you crave the stuff you picked up at your local 7-Eleven. Plus, they all felt like cavernous, soul-sucking sports bars. But in the past few years, things have begun to change. As rarer and more interesting imports have arrived, and as America's real-beer movement has grown in size and quality (there are now more than 1,500 craft brewers, the most in a century), a new generation of beer bars has emerged. Places where taps rotate weekly and their interiors don't feel like frat houses for grown-ups. No, these are modernized Bohemian beer halls, bars that favor serious craft beers over those with puns for names. Even if you're not a beer geek when you walk into one of these new temples of brew, you will be when you step out.

Just scanning the menu at a place like **The Monk's Kettle**—a narrow, always crammed gastropub in the San Francisco Mission District—is like a crash course in beer. You discover the difference between top-fermenting beers (ales) and bottomfermenting ones (lagers). You learn that Rauchbier gets that smoky taste from fire-roasted malt. You find out that low-alcohol "small beers" were originally brewed for children, and if you don't want to return to work sloshed, they're what you drink with your burger for lunch. Of

course, you could just ask the bartender for something dry (a tart Belgian Gueuze) or something spicy (a medium-bodied German Weizenbock)—the team behind the bar here includes a certified cicerone, a kind of sommelier for the beer world. And at places like L.A.'s **Father's Office** and New York's **Spitzer's Corner** (hip bars usually lacking in the type of clientele who would know—or care—what kind of glass Kwak should be served in), even the waiters are walking Wikipedias of beer, with the ability to pick out the right brew for your palate from their constantly changing chalkboard lists. And they're polite enough to do it in layman's terms: "Are you more a Sierra Nevada or a Guinness guy?" Gone are the days of blindly picking your pint based on the attractiveness of the tap handle, like a game of beer roulette.

To some—ancient Egyptians, Germans, pledging freshmen—beer is food. But to many, it's the best accompaniment to a meal or snack.



Sure, who doesn't love a jalapeño popper every now and then, but doesn't a kielbasa or andouille sausage sound like a better match for a refreshing Reissdorf Kölsch? That's what they've figured out at **Wurstküche** (German for "sausage kitchen"), a kind of beer hall with a warehouse aesthetic, tailor-made to attract the boho residents of L.A.'s Downtown Arts District. The beer selection here is heavy on Belgian and German brews—Spaten Pils for something crisp with an almost metallic bite, the Erdinger Dunkelweizen for those who think wheat beers are too fruity, and a \$250 six-liter bottle of Duvel Special Methusalem for those special drunken occasions.

And the reverence for craft beer doesn't stop at gastropubs and sausage joints. At New York's **DBGB**, it shares the spotlight with chef Daniel Boulud's upmarket takes on Lyonnaise cuisine like crispy pigs' feet, tripe in mustard sauce, and, well, sausage. The list, which is actually a small multipage binder, holds one of New York's best-curated selections of beer, a group of hard-to-find bottles and local drafts chosen with the attention that Boulud would normally reserve for Burgundy Grand Cru. If you try only one, make it the Birrificio del Ducato's Verdi Imperial Stout, a beer that starts off tasting like coffee and cocoa and ends with a chili-pepper finish and a slow, building heat—like biting into a chocolate cordial and discovering it's filled with *sriracha*. Perfect with anything spicy.

And if you're like me, as your fascination with beer and food grows, your inner beer nerd will feel compelled to seek out bars that specialize in food pairings. Yes, this was part of the beer world I so wanted to avoid—to me, the idea of matching a tart and woody Duchesse de Bourgogne with a foie gras *torchon* was as twee as...actually, I can't think of anything as twee. But trust me when I say that when done well, it can be awe inspiring. Like at **Jimmy's No. 43**, a subterranean bar with vaulted ceilings and a medieval glow in New York's East Village, where some nights are devoted to matching beers with everything



River's Beatification is superior.

Of course, you don't need to go full beer nerd to start casually enjoying the good stuff right away. And nowhere is that more evident than at **Biergarten** at New York's Standard hotel. It's here, in the warmer months, that New Yorkers and tourists gather after



from cheese to herring to bacon. Or at **Hopleaf** in Chicago, where selections from craft brewers like The Lost Abbey and Ommegang are poured with multiple courses. And for the money, you can't beat Brooklyn's **Beer Table**, which does a \$25 three-course meal with a \$15 beer pairing. Just remember: After you get a buzz and end up trying some of its rare selections, like stuff from Emelisse (a Dutch brewery new to the U.S.) and limited-edition ales from the Swiss brewer BFM, you'll easily, and happily, spend much more.

Once your knowledge of Abbey Ales and strains of wild yeast has begun to expand, you'll never again stock your refrigerator with six-packs from the corner bodega. At **City Beer Store** in San Francisco's SOMA neighborhood or at **Bierkraft** in Brooklyn, you can stop in for a weekend's worth of bottle-aged brews, but you'll probably end up pouring them there—both are a blend of beer store and bar, a kind of pinnacle of beer geekdom where the conversation will naturally lead to debates like which batch of Russian

taking a walk on the High Line (the city's new elevated, green promenade), sipping their choice of German drafts, gazing up at the towering Standard, which straddles both the bar and the park, watching the crowd grow bigger and boozier as the sun sets over the Hudson River. It's a spot where you can't help but enjoy yourself regardless of your knowledge of Bavarian hops.

The Best Modern Beer Bars

The Monk's Kettle

3141 16th St.
San Francisco
415-865-9523

Father's Office

3229 Helms Ave.
Los Angeles
310-736-2224

Spitzer's Corner

101 Rivington St.
New York City
212-228-0027

Wurstküche

800 East 3rd St.
Los Angeles
213-687-4444

DBGB

299 Bowery
New York City
212-933-5300

Jimmy's No. 43

43 East 7th St.
New York City
212-982-3006

Hopleaf

5148 N. Clark St.
Chicago
773-334-9851

Beer Table

427 Seventh Ave.
Brooklyn
718-965-1196

City Beer Store

1168 Folsom St.
San Francisco
415-503-1033

Bierkraft

191 Fifth Ave.



Brooklyn
718-230-7600

Biergarten
The Standard hotel
48 Washington St.
New York City
212-645-4646

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