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FOUR STAR BEER

Artisan brew takes its place next to wine on the tables of top restaurants

Stacy Finz, Chronicle Staff Writer
Friday, May 16, 2008

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Chronicle Illustration / Erick Wong; photo by Craig Lee
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Four Star Beer. Chronicle photo by Craig Lee. Chronicle photo illustration by Erick Wong

Diner: I'll start with the foie gras terrine and spaetzle salad, then I'll have the salmon tartare for my main course and the Guittard chocolate souffle for dessert.

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Server: Shall we pair the foie gras with a nice Tokaji, the salmon with rosé Champagne and a lovely Port to finish the meal?

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Diner: No, I'll just have beer.

If you think ordering a brew will get some haughty sommelier all hopped up, think again. Wine experts have been cheating on their grapes with a little malt, hops and yeast.

In recent years beer has gone from blue collar to white linen. Beverage directors at fine-dining establishments are not only beefing up their beer menus, but some are even replacing wine pairings with brews. The French Laundry in Yountville serves ale with cured veal heart canapes, at the

Fifth Floor in San Francisco it's stout with chocolate macarons, at Per Se in New York an English brown-style beer goes with washed rind cow's milk cheese, and at Rosemary's restaurant in Las Vegas there's a Belgian variety with pan-seared shrimp.

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Sommeliers credit their interest in the sudsy drink, long thought of in America as the perfect accompaniment to hot dogs and pretzels, to the abundance of artisan beers coming onto the market, and say they are elevating it to its rightful gastronomic status.

"We're not talking Bud Light," says Paul Roberts, the corporate wine and beverage director for the Thomas Keller Restaurant Group, which includes the French Laundry

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and Per Se.

Both restaurants, where multicourse meals can run into the hundreds of dollars, carry nine to 10 handcrafted beers and serve them instead of wine when the staff thinks it will complement the food better.

"On average beer will make an appearance once a night on the pairing menu with people who are more experimental," says Per Se sommelier James Hayes. "Some people are looking for creativity, others are looking for luxury, and almost everyone is looking for flavor. Beer still falls into the creative category. But it doesn't mean it can't overlap into the luxury category too."

The house ale

The world-famous restaurant group has been working with beer for some time now. But never ones to let innovation go flat, Hayes decided to take the whole beer thing to the next level. While trying to come up with Christmas gifts for Per Se's investors, the staff decided to send out house-made pastrami sandwiches. But what's a good deli club without beer? So Hayes and Per Se chef Jonathan Benno decided to make their own, or at least come up with a winning recipe that would complement their cured meats. They consulted with their friends over at Brooklyn Brewery, who brewed 50 cases of English brown-style ale just for them.

The Per Se folks called it Blue Apron Ale, more a nod to the kitchen staff's wardrobe than to beer's working-class persona. After sending out 50 of the 750 ml bottles as gifts, there was plenty left to serve at both Per Se and the French Laundry, as well as Keller's other Yountville restaurants, Bouchon and Ad Hoc.

It's been so successful that Roberts says they're working on a new beer. He finds that a couple of sips of brew are a great way to avoid wine tedium.

"After a long sequence of wines you start to get palate fatigue," says the beverage director about pairing menus in general. "Beer can wake up the palate. It's like a sorbet."

Bruce Paton, executive chef at the Cathedral Hill Hotel in San Francisco, says beer is frankly just more food-friendly than wine.

"Wine is too acidic," he says. "Don't get me wrong. There are some food and wine pairings made in heaven, but beer has so many flavor profiles that the opportunities are endless."

Paton first started playing around with beer and food, when he cooked at Barclays Restaurant and Pub in Oakland. It was a bar that obviously called for brew fare. But in 1997, when he left to go to the Clift Hotel in San Francisco, he thought his days of beer and cozies were over.

"At the time I didn't equate beer with high-end dining," he says.

So when the executive chef at the Clift asked his new chef to do beer pairings, Paton said, "I thought, 'Are you crazy?'"

Apparently, Paton's boss was on to something.



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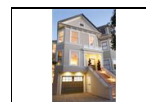
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