

## 6 - Burgers, Beer & Assoc.

The dynamic duo of upscale burgers and craft beers brings flavor opportunities

By Katie Ayoub

Some partnerships make so much sense that once established, it's hard to remember a time when they didn't go together. Such is the case with burgers and beer. We know the two form a natural flavor match. And we know that burgers have spun off into the better-burger trend. In step with that movement, interest in craft beers has soared. It's only fitting that these two should entwine, each gaining stronger footholds from the other's success and raising the better-burger movement to the next level.

"It's a natural evolution," says Darren Tristano, executive vice president of Technomic. "An elevated version of a burger with an elevated version of a beer."

Fueled in part by better-burger fast casuals getting their liquor licenses, craft beers have moved beyond swanky gastropubs and into the light of day. As evidence, take a look at the iconic better-burger Shake Shack. It partnered with a local brewery to create a custom ale, the Shack Meister. Consumers at this fast casual can enjoy that, or a number of other draft beers, perhaps while eating a Smoke Shack burger, a cheeseburger made with 100 percent all-natural Angus beef and dressed with Niman Ranch applewood smoked bacon, cherry peppers and Shake Sauce.

Putting down that premium burger for just a second, let's take a deeper look at craft beers. There is no sharper (and easier) way to draw local connections than by featuring local microbrews on your beer menu. They also tend to bring with them serious cool factor that demonstrates the American spirit while rebelling against The Man. Pedigree is delivered through attitude, flavor and narrative. And consumers are responding: According to the Brewers Association, there are now more than 2,400 craft breweries in the United States. "Americans are committed to supporting fresh, local and often independent craft and microbreweries that are serving up product that is highly differentiated from beer produced by large breweries," notes Melissa Abbott of The Hartman Group. That craft-beer narrative, often delivered through cool labels and clever brand names, taps right into the larger trend of consumers hankering for authentic experiences when dining out.

The growing multi-unit Smashburger works with regional brewers to pair beers with their burgers. For instance, in Houston area concepts, Saint Arnold's Weedwacker hefeweizen is



Among the most compatible of partnerships, beer and burger pairings are boosted by the craft brewery boom and the better-burger movement. Concepts like Washington-based Blazing Onion Burger Company are capitalizing on the compatibility through menu suggestions and pairing promotions.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BLAZING ONION BURGER COMPANY.

suggested alongside the Avocado Club Burger while the Mushroom Swiss Burger pairs with Saint Arnold's dark, malty Santo. The strategy is effective in boosting beer sales, reinforcing a compatible flavor experience and regionalizing a national brand. This trend is also being played out as a concept model, with several recent openings of fast casuals with a dedicated beer-and-burger focus.

“Craft burgers and craft beers—a pairing destined for each other—equates to food and drink with a story,” says consulting chef Rob Corliss. “Food with a story is becoming one of the greatest assets for restaurant operations, as more and more consumers demonstrate an affinity to connecting with their food choices.”

### **FLAVOR MATCH**

Before we get into the opportunities with this trend: What is it about the flavor pairing of a burger and a beer? It's like wine and cheese, but with an added bonus of actually satiating hunger and quenching thirst. Chef Allen Susser, a champion of New World cuisine, recently launched Burger Bar, with two units in Florida. Why a burger and beer joint? “Burgers are American comfort food,” he says. “You don't have to teach anyone how to eat them. This trend is more than just better burgers and better beer. You're upping the flavor and texture of the burger when the two come together.”

His burgers feature a blend of fresh-ground short rib, brisket and sirloin. Choices include a Tropical BBQ Burger topped with smothered onions, Monterey Jack and a papaya-pineapple barbecue sauce. Accompanying craft beers include Magic Hat #9 and Shock Top Pumpkin. “You don't want the burger to taste fatty,” says Susser. “It should taste meaty. A pleasing burger has a nice volume of fat with a good chew factor. One of the magical components in beer is the acidity, which cuts the fat. The yeasty part of the beer brings up the beefiness, and the acidity tempers that. It's a perfect match.”



In Chicago, PrimeBar's "Pints & Plates" menu makes pairing recommendations for four favorite drafts, including Blue Moon Belgian White with the Asian Turkey Burger and sweet potato fries.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF PRIMEBAR.

## MAKE THE CONNECTION

Craft beer and better burger pairings deepen your brand's ties to local and authentic—that's worthy of investment. Upscaling the burger/beer combination to a destination-worthy experience promises repeat business. "Think local and regional microbrews for your next LTO launch," says Corliss. "Call out one or two key connection points of the burger and brew."

Customization is king, where consumers respond positively to individual choice in a sea of bold offerings. "Provide opportunities for customization," suggests Tristano. "One level is to pair burgers with a variety of condiments, including ethnic and traditional options. A second level of customization is to offer a selection of burger and beer pairings."

At Boston-based Not Your Average Joe's, each unit has 20 beer taps, with a large number of them dedicated to craft and local brews. This casual concept balances higher-ticket items like Steak Frites served with haystack bistro fries with a solid selection of better burgers. "I love how approachable but upscale they can be," says Jeffrey Tenner, corporate chef. "Our burgers play a big role in how people are using us at the casual level. They give something to that casual diner, but still make it a really great, premium food experience." For a game-day promotion, the chain runs a beer and burger combo at a set price. "We run it when the home team is playing—any of our burgers with a draft beer for one price," he says. "It's been a great promotion for us."

One tactic for bundling beers and burgers together is delivered through menu position. "Offer an ideal beer recommendation next to each menu item with a description of flavors, IBUs [international bittering units] and alcohol levels to playfully educate consumers without being too scientific," says Abbott. Adding place of origin also helps promote the local/regional message.

"In this trend, there's no settling and no 'standard,'" says Datassential's Maeve Webster. "In fact, very often the operators treat the beer with respect usually reserved for wine—carefully pairing beers with specific burgers or offering flights so patrons can better understand the complexity of the beer-burger pairing."

This dynamic duo is reaching new heights, but it's still something consumers are very comfortable with—they're looking for restaurants to elevate the experience, directing their culinary adventure with a deft hand. From cookouts to tailgates to roadside burgers to beer gardens to gastropubs to upscale diners—beer and burgers are part of the American experience.



Highlighting "elevated American pub fare," Philadelphia's City Tap House brings burger and beer to the brunch menu with a Bistro Burger of Creekstone Farms beef, a fried egg, bacon, beer gastrique and Dijonnaise.

PHOTO COURTESY OF RYAN LEVINE FOR CITY TAP HOUSE.