

INTERNATIONAL BOWLING INDUSTRY

THE WORLD'S ONLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED EXCLUSIVELY TO THE BUSINESS OF BOWLING

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OPPORTUNITY POURS!

TAPPING INTO THE
CRAFT BEER
MOVEMENT

TALKING SHOP
GARY PARSONS' ROAD TO
BUILDING A PRO SHOP
POWERHOUSE

HIDDEN TREASURES
EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED
AT THE IBMHF

STRIKE LANES
LOUNGE BOWLING
IS AN ÜBER HIT IN BERLIN

CONTENTS



8

SHORTS

- Professional sports teams and bowling: Oakland A's; New York Giants; L.A. Clippers.
- 66 Bowl's Jim Haynes remembered.
- Tom Stephenson and Sunlite Bowling Center come to the aid of stranded teens.
- Coram Country Lanes' Bowling Blast Off grows leagues.

Compiled by Patty Heath



18

CENTER STAGE Strike Lanes Lounge Bowling

The new center has Berliners shouting, "Ich leibe Bowling!"

By Paul Lane



22

PRO SHOP SERIES



Talking Shop

Gary Parsons has grown his Washington, D.C. pro shop business into a three-location powerhouse.

By Mark Miller



18

VOL 21.10

28

ADVERTORIAL

Casio LampFree™ Laser LED Hybrid Projector

By Mark Miller

30

COVER STORY

Blending Craft Beer and Bowling

Just like proprietors, craft beer brewers are small, independent and traditional, and it's prime time to combine them.

By Robert Sax

38

FEATURE

Hidden Treasures

Kelli Thomerson takes us inside the inner workings of the International Bowling Museum and Hall of Fame.

By Fred Groh

44

REMEMBER WHEN 1964

Miller High Life

By Patty Heath

46 Showcase

47 Datebook

48 Classifieds

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OPPORTUNITY POURS

By Robert Sax

With craft beer brewing growing in popularity, the bowling industry is the perfect place to combine beer and bowling. It's a natural.

Beer and bowling go together like, well, beer and bowling. There's probably no other beverage as strongly identified with the sport. Now, after a period of decline for both, this classic American combo is enjoying a revival. Craft beer, a renaissance in beer-making that is sweeping the country, offers bowling center owners a refreshing way to "tap" into a hot trend and bring in new customers.

WHAT IS CRAFT BEER?

Craft beer is made by independent brewers in small batches and sold locally, the way it was done across the country before the giant brewing companies cornered the market and formulated their beer to please the lowest common denominator.

Aficionados prize craft beer for taste, quality and an independent spirit that revels in products made the old-fashioned way. Although craft beer held just 10.2% of the beer market by dollars in 2012, its sales grew by more than 15% from 2011. That's far better growth than the mega-brewers, whose market share is enormous but whose sales have been as flat as day-old beer.

According to the Brewers Association trade group, the number of craft brewers has gone from 8 in 1980 to 537 in 1994 to more than 2300 in 2012. The number of breweries in planning is skyrocketing, with more than 1,500 breweries in development as of June 1, 2013. With the majority of Americans living within 10 miles of a craft brewery, the association claims "There has never been a better time or place to drink beer than in the U.S. right now."

Maybe it's time for you to sell craft beer? ☺

WHO DRINKS CRAFT BEER?

Peter Starkel of FUN Advisors has consulted on several successful craft beer implementations at FECs. He describes fans of craft beer as primarily Generation X, Y and the Millennials, a group that falls roughly between the ages of 25-45. These are the people today who are most likely to have the discretionary dollars to spend in your bowling center and they are looking for a premium experience when they go out.

"[Craft beer drinkers] are not traditional sports bowlers," says Starkel. "They may take part in a recreational game, but they're not there for the bowling; they're

there to socialize with their friends." They are looking for friendly, professional staff, new or upgraded centers, and better quality food and beer than many centers are used to offering. That means you will have to up your game, but in return you will get a customer who is willing to spend more to get what he or she wants.

Craft beer lovers are more concerned about quality than price. They will spend money on craft beer because it has a higher perceived



Consultant Peter Starkel, FUN Advisors, Traverse City, MI.

value than the big domestic brands. They will accept a range of prices if the choices are interesting, as opposed to expecting all beer to be the same price. While the cost of craft beer is higher, you can make more gross profit on each beer sold. That's good for your revenues, and a great hedge against reduced consumption in an era of tougher drunk driving laws and stricter enforcement.

Upgrading your food choices is a good idea, too, because craft beer lovers like good food with their beer. In general they want healthier, more interesting choices, so your menu needs to feature healthier, fresher-tasting items and far fewer deep-fried or fatty choices.

Setting up a craft beer bar in your FEC is

COVER STORY



Derek Richards of Stardust Entertainment Center is happy to serve his customers distinctly unique craft beers from his *Michigan Tap Room*.

similar to adding any new food and beverage operation. You have to understand your customers' needs and commit yourself to offering the quality and service that will pull them in and keep them there. You also have to understand that you will now be competing with other bars and restaurants in your market, not just other bowling centers.

Perhaps the biggest change you'll need to make is in the way you think about beer. Fans of craft beer are seeking novelty and an adventure in taste, not just a buzz. First and foremost this means offering true craft beers and downplaying or dumping the boring old standbys.

It's important to see your tap room or beer operation as a profit center separate from

your bowling operation. By cultivating an independent and competitive spirit, you'll be able to keep the surprises coming for your customers. An experienced bar manager who knows craft beer, or is willing to learn about it, is also a must.

While many craft beers come in bottles, the centerpiece of any craft beer operation is a selection of beers on tap. Starkel recommends a minimum of twelve taps, divided equally among nationally-known, regional and local craft beers. You can also reserve a few taps for "beta" beers (brews under development by local brewers) because craft beer drinkers are



The *Michigan Tap Room* has an excellent layout where larger groups of six to eight people can gather.

always interested in trying something new. That also means rotating your beer selection to keep things interesting for your patrons. With the great variety of craft beers available, that part is easy.

TAPPING THE TREND ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Tony Yanow, co-founder of Golden Road Brewery in Los Angeles, sees a symbiotic relationship between craft brewers and bowling centers and other community entertainment spots, because craft beer is a "local" experience. "It's important for me to connect to new customers in my area and introduce them to my beer," he says. "And it's a chance for them to tell me how they like my beer." He's looking to build the kind of close customer relationships that just don't exist for giant brands, just as center owners do.

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COVER STORY

Yanow also sees craft beer as more than a fad. "I think it's an enduring trend, even if the current rapid growth slows. The bubble won't burst."

A growing number of FEC operators are already succeeding with craft beer. Others are planning to jump in soon. A selection of new and forthcoming operations includes:

STARDUST ENTERTAINMENT CENTER

There's a beer revolution happening in Michigan, according to the owners of Stardust Entertainment Center in Saginaw. The Great Lakes State is home to a lot of great craft beers, and is one of the fastest growing craft beer markets. That was good news for Gary Richards and his son Derek, who were looking for a way to revitalize their business.

Although Stardust is a well-appointed FEC, it was too far from the local suburbs to compete with other centers for family business including birthday parties. But with a college and a Dow Chemical operation nearby, Peter Starkel suggested Derek join his passion for beer with a growing trend that could bring in a new clientele.

Inspired by successful beer-themed restaurants like The Yard House and Buffalo Wild Wings, Derek developed a concept that emphasized local craft beers. The Michigan Tap Room at Stardust features 18 taps of Michigan-brewed beer and the Richards boast that "customers will often be surprised but never disappointed." Response has been excellent since day one, with craft beer sales doubling every month.

Special programming like "tap takeovers," in which a local brewery brings in new beers for a night, have been bringing in the crowds. Happy hours, band performances on the lanes and sports night specials have also boosted business and generated bowling sales as well.

URGE: CRAFT ALLEY

In North San Diego County, California, Grant Tondro is betting big on craft beer and bowling. Tondro, the founder of several upscale restaurants including Urge Gastropub, The Barrel Room and Brothers Provisions, is now developing Urge: Craft Alley, a combination brewpub, bottle shop and bowling alley to be housed in a 22,000 square foot former fitness center in the town of Vista.

Tondro is a fan of the movie "The Big Lebowski," and while its bowling anti-hero "The Dude" quaffed White Russians, the cult classic inspired the concept behind Urge: Craft Alley. "I like bowling because it doesn't require a lot of skill to enjoy the game, it's fun for all ages, and you can play it with a drink in one hand," says Tondro.

San Diego County is a center of craft brewing, with the influential Stone Brewery setting the pace for a raft of good breweries and brew pubs; Vista alone has eight microbreweries. The new center will

have eight to ten lanes and will offer open bowling only. The food will be locally-sourced gastropub grub, and to start there will be 51 beer taps including 6-8 house beers custom-brewed for Urge. Tondro also guarantees tap space for every local brewer.

While families won't be turned away, this isn't really a place for kids; there won't be an arcade or Cosmic bowling. Urge: Craft Alley is aimed primarily at males aged 26-46 who want to relax while drinking great beer and eating great food. Tondro believes the concept will do well with suburbanites, and is already looking to expand to Los Angeles. Urge: Craft Alley is scheduled to open in the first quarter of 2014.

THE GUTTER

At the opposite end of the beer and bowling spectrum from Urge: Craft Alley is Brooklyn, New York's quirky The Gutter. A bowling alley/bar/concert space, The Gutter occupies a former warehouse in the hip enclave of Williamsburg. When it opened in 2005 there were no other bowling alleys in the neighborhood.

The founders installed several well-worn wooden lanes from a defunct center "somewhere in Ohio" and added vintage Brunswick A2 pinsetters. True to the do-it-yourself ethic of the neighborhood, manager-turned-owner T.C. learned to run and maintain the machines and lanes by trial and error. Now he "loves the bowling business" and is thinking about opening other locations.

For T.C.'s laid-back, mostly single 20-something customers, The Gutter is a place to hang out with friends, a neighborhood bar with bowling. The all-craft beer selection includes 12 taps and eight bottles at any one time, with brands and styles rotated to suit the seasons. The Gutter regularly features tap-takeovers with local breweries, who promote the events via social media and bring in 50-100 people. "People always want to try new beers," says T.C.

Prices for beer and bowling are affordable, and there's a bowling happy hour special of two games or two hours for the price of one. There are no lane reservations, but there are several leagues during the week. Music is featured in a back

T.C., the owner of The Gutter, personally maintains the salvaged lanes.



OTHER WAYS TO ROLL

Looking for variety in your bowling as well as your beer? Craft beer also goes well with two older forms of bowling, bocce and lawn bowls. Bocce, played on a natural dirt court indoors or out, is also enjoying a revival around the country. Here's a sampling of places where you can roll another way:

Von Trapp's of Seattle is two-parts German, one-part Italian with its mix of "bier, brats and bocce." Sample a variety of German-style craft beers while playing on one of five indoor courts. www.vontrapps.com

The Matchbox, a popular neighborhood bar in Denver's River North art district, has an open beer garden, a bocce court, and a modest craft beer list. Join a bocce league or enjoy open play. www.thematchboxdenver.com

Pinstripes, an upscale restaurant chain in Chicago and Minneapolis, features Italian food, wine and some local craft brews, plus bocce and 10-pin bowling. The annual "Pintastic" bocce tournament offers more than \$25,000 in prize money. www.pinstripes.com

Brit's Pub in Minneapolis has four manicured grass "rinks" for lawn bowling during the summer and fall. There's open and league play and you can rent the place for parties. A few local craft brews and lots of British standbys, plus rink-side service. www.britspub.com/

room on weekends, with three bands for a modest \$5 cover.

Decidedly local and low-key, The Gutter is the neighborhood alternative to Brooklyn Bowl, the glitzier, and pricier, FEC down the street. The Gutter is going strong after six years, a successful example of how to appeal to a hip, urban crowd.

CRAFTING YOUR STRATEGY

As with any change in your bowling operation, craft beer is not a quick fix. "You can't throw in craft beer like you throw in a new video game," cautions Starkel, "and expect that's the magic bullet." There are plenty of proprietors who have simply added a few craft beer taps and then wondered why the customers didn't appear.

It is a promising strategy for centers that are planning on catering primarily to college-educated, upper-income adults under 40 years of age. In an era of wholesale change in the industry it is well worth considering if you are in the right market and willing to work at it. Plus, if you like good beer, you're sure to enjoy your product research. ♦



Robert Sax is a writer and PR consultant in Los Angeles. He grew up in Toronto, Canada, the home of five-pin bowling.

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