

Time Magazine: The New Brew

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By KATE NOVACK

It's a warm day in April, and the private dining room at Gramercy Tavern, one of New York City's top restaurants, is set for a tasting. Kevin Garry, Gramercy's assistant beverage director, has lined up five glasses and five bottles on the long wooden table. First, Garry pours a 2002 Schneider Aventinus from Germany. It's caramel colored, with hints of nutmeg and banana bread. Next up is a spicy Hitachino from Japan, followed by a 1998 Rogue Old Crustacean from Oregon, with sherry and port qualities. "This is the new torch holder," he says as he fills a fourth glass with J.W. Lees Harvest. It's smooth, with hints of caramel and raisin.

Of course, if caramel and raisin don't sound like torchworthy qualities for wine, that's because J.W. Lees isn't a wine. It's a beer, one of about two dozen on Gramercy Tavern's new vintage-beer list.

Finding great beer used to mean seeking out that hole-in-the-wall bar or discovering a local purveyor with a passion for barley and hops or even trolling eBay for bottles of Thomas Hardy's Ale, the Dom Pérignon of beer. Now some of the country's best restaurants are offering craft beers--produced by small, independent brewers--on the menu and often suggesting food pairings.

"Many places still have a beer menu that looks like a gas station," says Garrett Oliver, brewmaster at the Brooklyn Brewery and one of the country's leading beer experts. "But beer is becoming part of the culinary landscape. Even some of the French restaurants are starting to realize that they might want something more than Kronenbourg."

Gramercy's beer list includes selections from North America, Europe and Japan, with bottles dating as far back as 1993 and ranging in price from \$13 for a Hitachino Celebration Ale to \$23 for a Thomas Hardy's Ale. Higgins Restaurant, an upscale bistro in Portland, Ore., even offers a short list of after-dinner beers. In March the Sheraton hotel chain Four Points named a chief beer officer to oversee its new lists of imported and regional craft beers. Meanwhile, waiters at the Michelin-starred Spotted Pig restaurant in New York City gently explain to patrons that cask-conditioned ales-- traditional British beers--are best served at a cellar temperature rather than ice cold.

The restaurant world's openness to artisanal beer is good news for the brewing industry. Overall, the beer business is flat, but sales of craft beers are booming, up more than 15% last year, according to the Nielsen Co. Brewers can thank the baby boomers for the shift. As people get older, they drink less; and as they drink less, they drink better. And twentysomethings who grew up on enhanced flavors (think Starbucks coffee) are opting for tastier brews to match their more developed palates.

The growth of craft beer also mirrors a broader focus on artisanally produced and local foods, from arugula in salads at McDonald's to increasingly popular 100-mile diets, restricted to food produced within a short radius of home.

"As the movement in local foods grows, you'll see more of that reflected in drinks," says Malcolm Knapp, a restaurant consultant who provides industry forecasts to the National Restaurant Association. "The same sociological and peer-identity issues that drive what kind of foods are going to be consumed will drive more interesting alcohol."

So what does more interesting beer taste like? The Hitachino Celebration Ale is brewed with orange peel, coriander, nutmeg and cinnamon. The high wheat content and nutmeg aroma of the Schneider Aventinus make it a great beer for a fall afternoon. Rogue Old Crustacean is intense and malty--a perfect complement, suggests Garry, to grilled meats or braised pork belly. The J.W. Lees Harvest would go well with a ginger cake, while the 1993 Thomas Hardy's is so rich and sweet, it could stand up to a Stilton.

Back in the private dining room at Gramercy, Garry pours the fifth and final beer, a 2003 Brooklyn Black Chocolate Stout. It looks like espresso and has an earthy taste with only very subtle hints of chocolate, a nice accompaniment to a chocolate dessert--or maybe even a substitute.