



Branding for high-end beers often is accomplished by presenting the brews in appropriate, often eye-catching barware. Kwak, a Belgian beer, is served in a spectacular format, a traditional glass and holder modeled after one designed by brewery founder, Pauwel Kwak.

Beer takes the High Road

Beer is the world's number-one alcoholic beverage, and quality beers are remarkably adept food partners that are surging in popularity. The finest are developing a *cult following* yet are far more widely available and less expensive than scarce and rare wines and spirits. *High-end brews*—craft beers and imports—are *outperforming* most beverages in annual growth.

Despite these positives, upscale restaurants routinely neglect the beer category. Living in the past, too many restaurateurs see high-end beer as a contradiction in terms. Restaurants can benefit greatly from providing guests the option of trading up for quality by offering exceptional world-class beers.

Suds' Seismic Shifts

Before restaurant beverage managers can put together a successful high-end beer program, they must understand the beer universe and the consumers who populate it. The beer landscape is changing fast, offering styles as diverse and food friendly as wines. Where beer choices were once limited to a dozen brands of “vanilla” (mass-market lagers), today's beer market reflects a Baskin-Robbins-like range of flavors. Strong beers, sour beers, wheat beers, fruit beers, spiced beers, smoked beers—specialty brews of all stripes—are emerging to meet demand.

Beer accounts for over half of every dollar spent on alcoholic beverages in the United States, and its loyal customers occupy coveted demographics. Over one-third of Americans identify themselves as “regular beer consumers.” Today's premium-beer drinkers are the foodies of the future, demonstrating their

willingness to spend a little extra for a more flavorful beverage. Restaurants cannot afford to dismiss beer drinkers, especially those who have begun trading up for quality.

Often the rationale given by restaurateurs for dismissing beer is that overall beer sales look flat. But a closer look at the numbers reveals tremendous changes within the category. The big brewers—Anheuser-Busch, Miller, and Coors—still lead the pack by a mile in volume, but their share of the pie is shrinking. A rebirth of sorts is under way in the world of beer, and premium products of all kinds are surging ahead.

The American craft-beer segment is growing at breakneck speed. Craft brewers are defined as those producing less than two million barrels a year who brew primarily with barley malt, not cheaper filler grains such as corn or rice. The craft-beer segment posted double-digit growth last year and has realized an almost 30 percent increase since 2002. World-class “all-malt” beers can be enjoyed for a fraction of the cost of other upscale drinks, and sales of luxury brands show no sign of slipping. Imported beer is also growing steadily at the expense of the big domestic brewers. Americans are willing to pay top dollar to drink world-class beer and are not yet deterred by steady price increases.



Revamping Your Beer Program: Logistics Matter

For some restaurants, a standard beer list can be reconfigured to accommodate a handful of world-class offerings without changing the total number of offerings. Trimming redundant brands can help speed inventory turnover and make room for new items at once. For others, adding a dozen or more new items may be feasible. Before you begin, explore the physical limitations that determine what scale of beer program your operation can execute well.

Selling High End

The same factors that drive beer's mass appeal—low cost and widespread availability—lead many restaurateurs to overlook its potential. The average beer's small per-serving price tag provides little incentive for operators looking only to boost sales. Easier access than wine or spirits gives beer an "everyday" image as well, while many restaurants strive to provide an "out-of-the-ordinary" experience. Small wonder beer gets short shrift in beverage programs.

But if everyday beer is seen as too common and too cheap, why not offer a selection of rare, expensive beers? A top-notch beer list is easy to assemble and requires only a modest investment, but such a roster can earn healthy returns and provide an uncommon competitive advantage. There has never been a better time to put together a high-end beer list.

The boom of American craft brewing allows restaurateurs across the country to feature high-quality local products. Dedicating a little shelf space to superpremium beers will capitalize on existing trends in the marketplace. Even a handful of world-class beers can please a desirable clientele, add depth to a beverage program, and pair well with virtually any menu. Fair prices mean high-end beer lists cost little to implement and can turn hearty profits, while keeping budget-minded guests happy and returning more often.

Refrigeration—Traditional top-loading "beer coolers" are better for bottled water than for high-end beer. Designed to store a deep inventory of a narrow range of products, they make inventory rotation difficult and tend to mangle labels. Reach-ins are more suitable, accommodating a wider range of items in smaller quantities. Since visibility will speed service, consider measuring available shelf frontage to calculate how many beers can be stocked without bogging down bartenders.

Dedicated wine coolers are also ideal for storing high-end beers. Lighter, paler beers and lagers will perform well at white-wine temperatures, around 40°F. Ideally, darker beers and strong ales should be served warmer, around 50°F. Where space is available, these beers are perfect candidates for the new energy- and space-efficient thermoelectric wine coolers, which operate without bulky compressors on little more electricity than a light bulb uses.

Storage—Since beers are purchased by the case, additional storage space is needed beyond the bar. Like wine, beer must be protected from heat and light, but there is little evidence to support the myth that quick temperature changes damage beer. Light is particularly deleterious for beer, as it leads hop components to break down and form a "skunky," sulfurous-smelling compound.

Most beers should be consumed "fresh" in their first six months of age, but strong, malty ales can age gracefully for a decade or more. Most brewers recommend that bottled beers, including those with cork closures, be stored upright. As with wine, a cellar temperature near 55°F is ideal for beer storage. Colder food walk-ins will do no damage but can give unfiltered beers a temporary "chill haze" and will slow the maturation of those beers that are designed to age. Storing beer at temperatures above 60°F will speed its decline.

Menu—Menus are billboards for beverages, whether in a booklet, on a table tent, or on the walls. Suggestive selling works best when guests can scan a list of tempting options, so be certain to reserve some menu space to advertise your beers, or print a separate beer list. Expecting guests to ask about beer and servers to answer correctly makes unnecessary work for both. Well-organized beer lists will sell more beer, and systems of communication designed for wine lists translate very well. Information about style and region of origin can be listed on each item line for short lists or can provide helpful subcategories for longer ones. Making note of color and alcohol content is especially helpful for adventurous guests looking to try something new.



Choosing Beer for Your List

The same principles used to choose wines or spirits also apply to selecting beers for your operation. They should be distinctive and food friendly and should deliver good quality for the dollar.

Complement Your Concept

Restaurants that showcase local produce could choose to focus on their region's brewers—terrific beers are being made in almost every part of the country. Restaurants offering classic cuisines may prefer to highlight the traditional European styles that have inspired imitation worldwide. An eclectic international selection of world-class beers is always appropriate, especially where menu influences range widely.

Complement Your Cuisine

Bold, highly seasoned foods can handle strong “sipping” beers, especially flavorful ales and spiced beers like those common in Belgium and the United States. Subtle foods emphasizing simplicity and freshness will benefit more from the understatement of lighter “session” beers. Especially apt are the crisp lagers and wheat beers of Germany, the restrained ales of the United Kingdom, and American beers that favor old-world, food-oriented sensibilities.

Complement Your Guests' Tastes

Avoid duplication of style among your high-end beers until your customers vote with their dollars. For example, if

powerful India pale ales are a hit, add another, but add depth with a different price range or a different regional identity.

Complement the Seasons

Plan on a few slots for seasonal specialties such as spiced holiday ales or delicate summer wheat beers.

Read about the high-end beer program at Café d'Alsace in this issue's Bar Tab (pages 50–53)

Visit isantemagazine.com for Marnie Old's in-depth guide to high-end beers.



► Marnie Old (marnieold.com) is assistant dean of wine studies at Manhattan's French Culinary Institute and one of the nation's highest-profile sommeliers. She is the coauthor, with Sam Calagione, brewmaster of Dogfish Head, of *He Said "Beer," She Said "Wine,"* which will be published in 2008. Her wine, beer, and spirits column appears in *Philadelphia Magazine*.