

Having a beer on the house, and they mean that literally

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The next time you hit your favorite restaurant for happy hour, take a gander at the row of taps behind the bar. Chances are good you'll see a custom handle advertising a house beer alongside the more familiar Miller Lite and Budweiser taps.

Local restaurants, hoping to boost beer sales and accommodate the growing population of craft beer connoisseurs, are adding their own house beers to the beverage menu. Owners say customers, particularly those who favor microbrews, consider drinking the house beer their way of supporting a local eatery.

When the Old Oar House Brewery in Millville opened 10 years ago, they put a house brew called Oar House Pale Ale on tap alongside more popular mass market beers.

"When people come in to a small pub like this, they're happy to see you have your own tap up there," said Old Oar House day manager Mary Pat McCann. "Everyone's willing to try it out."

Lou Di Ventura, owner of Ventura's Offshore Caf, recently unveiled Ventura's Offshore Ale at the Northfield restaurant.

"I was reading one of our industry magazines called Cheers," Di Ventura said. "It had an article about several restaurants who were venturing into house brews, as they call it."

The process of creating a house beer starts with finding a local brewery to supply it. Rather than creating a brand new beer from scratch, the brewery will usually take one of its existing brews and repackage it for the restaurant.

"Our batch size is about 80 kegs of beer," explained Gene Muller, founder of the Flying Fish Brewing Company in Cherry Hill. "It's really hard for someone to go through that much beer in a way that keeps it fresh."

The Flying Fish Brewery provides house beers for several area restaurants, including the Old Oar House and Ventura's Offshore.

"We get lots of e-mails and calls," Muller said. "We select maybe one out of 10 (customers) - someone who's carried our beer before and whose restaurant is a stable business."

The brewer's first job is to take a look at the restaurant's menu and figure out what beer would go best with the food it serves. According to Muller, most restaurants go with a lighter beer that can appeal to a range of beer drinkers.

"You don't want to say 'This is our house beer,' and 90 percent of people are like 'What the heck is that?'" Muller said. "They get this big glass of super strong dark beer and it's like 'I didn't really want this.'"

Di Ventura and Muller chose an extra pale ale to complement the Ventura's Offshore eclectic menu, which ranges from pizzas to oak-grilled filets and New York strip steaks.

"We will venture into more bountiful beers as we progress," Di Ventura said.

Once the beer is chosen, it's all about paperwork. The restaurant owner works with the brewer to come up with the name, and then the label is put up for approval by the U.S. Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau, and also registered with the state government. After the paperwork is approved, the beer is delivered to the eateries. Restaurateurs usually purchase custom-designed tap handles to advertise their new beer.

"A lot of restaurants use something that will reflect their name," Muller said. "Ventura's used their logo and adapted it to the tap."

Cost varies

The price of bringing in a house beer varies depending on the brewery a restaurant chooses to use, and how much they decided to spend on tap handles, promotional material and staff training. The price the customer pays to order the house beer is usually up to the restaurant owner. At Ventura's Offshore, a frosted mug of Ventura's Offshore Ale costs \$3.25, while a mug of Samuel Adams costs about \$3.75. According to Di Ventura, it's tough to compare prices between house brews and mass market beers.

"They are like two different types of beer," Di Ventura explained. "It's like comparing an apple to an orange, even though they are still fruit."

Most restaurants offer their house beers on tap. But some prefer to serve their special brews in bottles. Flying Fish bottles house beer for Congress Hall in Cape May, and is working on a bottled beer for the new Chelsea Hotel in Atlantic City. The bottles are a more unique experience for diners, but it's a bit more expensive

because of the packaging. Ordering bottled beer from Flying Fish can easily cost a restaurant a minimum of \$10,000, according to Muller.

The success of house beer is prompting some restaurateurs to look into other unique beverage offerings. Di Ventura is in the process of choosing a winery to supply a house wine for Ventura's Offshore.

"(Wine) is a trickier process," Di Ventura admitted. "You have to scout the area for great wineries, and at the same time keep in mind that you need wine at the right price point, especially in today's rough economy."

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