

The Eagle Has Landed: 5 Best New Gastropubs

PHILADELPHIA

Ten minutes after she walked into the old tavern at the corner of 44th and Spruce streets in West Philly, Leigh Maida knew exactly how she wanted her gastropub to look.

She and her husband, Brendan “Spanky” Hartranft, had recently opened another bar, the Memphis Taproom, across town in the Port Richmond section of Philadelphia. Now they’d been offered an unexpected opportunity to buy a second place just a few blocks away from their home. Maida cringed at the bar’s walls decorated with cream-colored shamrocks.

“I wanted a neighborhood joint that feels like it’s been there forever,” Maida says. “A swinging rock ‘n roll juke joint... a dark bar where you can come and drink beer and act like an adult and put your glass down without worrying about leaving a ring.”

From the exposed metal-faced fire door to the old-fashioned light bulbs, Local 44 – which opened to wide acclaim on New Year’s Day – reflects Maida’s dream.

And perhaps more importantly, the bar reflects its neighborhood. This part of town, located about eight blocks from the busy campus of the University of Pennsylvania, is quiet and leafy and old. It lacks the sleek steel of Center City’s skyscrapers, the sacred history of Society Hill, the Italian cuisine of South Philadelphia. The place has the comfortably weathered character of your favorite leather jacket. A view of it all is just through Local 44’s large windows (a rarity in this town, where Quaker law once restricted saloon windows). Pull up a stool, and you could be sitting next to a college professor reading test papers or a City Hall worker checking lottery numbers. Start a conversation, and in minutes you’ll have the lowdown on anything from whether the Eagles should re-sign McNabb to the funkiness of the 2006 vintage Cantillon Lou Pepe that the bartender just poured.

“It’s amazing,” said Hartranft, “how much people in this neighborhood already know about great beer.”

Hartranft cut his teeth as a manager at the tender age of 19 at the city’s famed Khyber Pass pub, then worked for years at Nodding Head Brewery & Restaurant. At Local 44, he challenged himself to create a 20-tap lineup with no duplicate styles. “And not only that,” he declared, “but every one of them is a standout. Everything has a distinct, totally dialed-in flavor.”

A classic Irish stout? Forget Guinness; try locally brewed Sly Fox O’Reilly’s Stout. A balanced IPA? He’ll pour you an Elysian Immortal from Seattle. Something in a bottle? There’s just one available, Orval Trappist ale, Hartranft’s favorite.

Originally, the pair planned to serve just three menu items: wings, burgers, and fries. “But every time we talked about food,” Hartranft said, “we kept saying, ‘Well, this would be nice to serve...’”

Which kind of makes you wonder: What kind of food conversation ends with the staff agreeing on Reuben Fritters? Yes, a Reuben, as in pastrami and swiss – only this delight is rolled in rye bread batter, deep-fried then served with sauerkraut and Thousand Island. Crunch into one, and your mouth explodes with the juicy sweet-and-sour goodness of the classic deli belly-buster. It’s unlikely the brewers at DeRanke had this dish in mind when they brewed XX Bitter, but the hoppy bite of this Belgian IPA seems perfect for washing down this hugely flavored delight.

The couple calls it boardwalk cuisine: Corn dogs like they’d serve on a carnival midway, Cuban sandwiches from the streets of Miami. Half the menu is vegan and it’s all under 10 bucks, but that doesn’t mean it skimps on calories. The po’ boy is just as full-flavored as the one they serve on Bourbon Street, only this crunchy baguette is filled with fried oyster mushrooms. It only seems natural to pair it with another offbeat flavor, Allagash Curieux, a Belgian tripel from Maine aged in a used Jim Beam barrel.

“Our goal was, instead of beer accompanying the food, we would serve food to accompany the beer,” Hartranft said.

There, he said it, no excuses: the beer comes first at Local 44. Take a big sip and don’t be embarrassed if your glass leaves a ring on the table. –Don Russell