



# Craft Beer

## CULINARY “INFUSIONS”

CHARLOTTE'S BREWERIES  
LOOK BEYOND CLASSIC  
INGREDIENTS TO LOCAL  
AND SEASONAL.

BY AMELIA LEVIN



Craft beer is no longer a trend. Now a mainstay at restaurants and bars nationwide, the lines between beverage and culinary continue to blur as restaurants host more beer-pairing dinners and breweries look to food ingredients as new flavor infusions for their brews.

The brewers, chefs and other business people of Charlotte know this well. As one of the fastest growing cities in the U.S., the Queen City boasts a whopping 40 microbreweries, with more in the pipeline. Much of the growth has happened in the last five or six years, following the Pop the Cap legislation in 2005 that allowed breweries to brew alcohol over the 6% alcohol (ABV) limit. Since then, the craft beer revolution in Charlotte has found its way into the burgeoning dining scene, as well.

“The culinary and craft beer community of Charlotte is collaborative, and it’s great to see everyone work together to come up with unique dishes and beers,” says Kristi Martin, owner/founder of FEAST Food Tours & Culinary Events, Inc., who plans many food tours with the city’s multiple craft breweries. “Our goal is to tell the culinary stories happening in our area, but also to connect guests to those passionate individuals.”

Many breweries team up with local restaurants to plan special beer-pairing dinners, or take over a tap at a restaurant to showcase experimental beers for an evening, a week or longer. Others have exclusive arrangements with food trucks in the area. The latest evolution of this collaborative spirit, Martin finds, seems to be in breweries’ use of different foods as ingredients of the brewing process for “culinary-infused” or culinary-inspired beers.

This infusing of beers with foods gives the brews a deeper, more complex layering of flavors, as happens when chefs add seasonings, acid and other balancing ingredients throughout the cooking process.

Birdsong Brewing Company once teamed up with local seafood eatery ROCKSALT for Chesapeake Bay Rochambeau oysters for an oyster stout reminiscent of the type of ale enjoyed by oyster-slurping pub-goers in the 1800s. Historical reports indicate that brewers used oyster shells first as a clarifying agent when finishing beer, but later infused the oysters themselves for additional flavor. Birdsong adds whole oysters during the boiling of the wort just long enough to release the brine without overcooking them.

“We love oysters here at Birdsong, so it was a no-brainer that we wanted to brew an oyster stout when ROCKSALT reached out to us,” says Tara Goulet, co-founder with husband Chris. “Oyster stout has been a relatively classic style of stout, and while most of what we make is related to the season, we consider this beer an all-season stout because of its milder characteristics.”

The medium-bodied beer has balanced chocolate notes for a “very drinkable” brew. “The key to this beer is the sea salt brine from the oysters, which plays off the chocolate notes in a unique and delicious way,” Goulet says.

Birdsong has also hosted special oyster dinners in the fall, pairing the oyster stout with other types of oysters, such as sweet, buttery Rappahannock oysters from Topping, Virginia, and briny Olde Salts from Chincoteague, Virginia.



ABOVE: Local oysters from ROCKSALT for an oyster stout dinner at Birdsong Brewing Company.



At Legion Brewing, head brewer Alexa Long teamed up with friends and neighbors at Undercurrent Coffee to create an Indian-style tonic blending ginger, turmeric, black peppercorn, lemon grass and licorice root for the Tonic the Hedgehog (5.5%), an American wheat ale. “It’s a unique and refreshing brew that is both beautiful and beneficial for health,” Long says.

She has also collaborated with Resident Culture Brewing to create a kvass, or Slavic-style fermented beverage, using 300 pounds of cinnamon raisin and rye bread loaves from nearby Nova’s Bakery. The bread is soaked overnight to soften, and the mixture is added to the mash the next day. The kvass is also fermented using Nova’s sourdough starter, which consists of lactic bacteria and wild yeast for a mild funk and acidity balancing out the cinnamon notes.

### SEASONAL SIPS

Many breweries in Charlotte focus on seasonal foods as complements to seasonal beers when coming up with new variations.

“We’re constantly seeking what’s available seasonally and utilizing local farmers to source grain, produce, honey, herbs and various other ingredients,” says Long. “We’re pretty experimental,

and certainly seek inspiration from the culinary world.”

The Late Tates with Nate (6.6%) is an amber ale brewed with sweet potatoes and butternut squash. The locally grown tubers and gourds were slow-roasted in-house by kitchen manager Nate Snow. “The beer got its name because Nate worked tirelessly until 3 a.m. finishing the job, for which we are grateful,” Long says. The result was a full-bodied beer with a rich, earthy sweetness.

The Nooks and Crannies (6.8%) is a kettle-soured ale meant to mimic the flavors of cranberry pie, and which gets its subtle sweetness from the addition of lactose and vanilla beans. The beer was released just before the winter holidays last year.

In the spring for Cinco de Mayo, Legion offers the Juan Direction (4.7%), a German-style gose lager inspired by the classic margarita that’s brewed with limes and oranges that were juiced, zested and soaked in tequila. “The result is a funky fusion of sweet, sour, salty and citrus,” Long says.

### FORAGED, FUSED-IN

Many chefs look to their immediate surroundings to find foraged foods to use in dishes. Some brewers in Charlotte are doing the same.

At Free Range Brewing, co-founder/brewer Jason Alexander works with many area foragers and chefs to collect ingredients. “We are quickly realizing that we have so many great ingredients around us, and are always thinking about how we can incorporate them into our beers,” he says. “Not only are they delicious, but we can use them to find a good balance in beers for some unexpected flavors without scaring people away.”

Alexander works with a couple of local foragers to source wild sumac from the area, which he uses to make a tea that’s then incorporated into the beer during the brewing process. The bright citrusy/tart seed clusters are boiled in a 140-gallon vessel, then drained, chilled and used in the fermentation step because of the plant’s naturally occurring wild bacteria.

“Native Americans used sumac to produce a drink similar to lemonade, which was the inspiration for this farmhouse ale. It’s a little more rustic and drier, using all local malted grains without any hops, in the style of an old-world gruit before hops were cultivated for use in beer,”

ABOVE: Legion Brewing’s Nooks and Crannies beer made with vanilla beans.



## FOOD PAIRINGS AND INFUSIONS

Most of Charlotte's breweries can be found in either the artsy NoDa (North Davidson) or the nightlife-heavy South End areas of town, while others are cropping up in nearby Gastonia, a satellite city about 20 miles away.

### THE OLDE MECKLENBURG BREWERY

Known to locals as OMB, The Olde Mecklenburg Brewery, which opened in 2009, is the oldest brewery in the area specializing in German-style beers reminiscent of those found at German beer halls. The menu features German-inspired eats such as Bavarian pretzels, pork schnitzel and a variety of wursts.

**THIRSTY NOMAD BREWING CO.** This brewery serves up taps that range from pale ales to chocolate stouts in a space with a steampunk theme. The light-fare menu has chips and hummus, as well as Queen City Pretzel Factory pretzels served hot to order with a mustard/cheese dipping sauce using Thirsty Nomad beer. The brewery also allows guests to order-in food.

**THREE SPIRITS BREWERY** The brainchild of a former emergency room doctor, this 9,100-square-foot, 10-barrel brew house gives a nod to Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and offers food from rotating food trucks on-site.

**BOLD MISSY BREWERY** This NoDa brew house honors the courageous achievements of women such as Harriet Tubman and Sally Ride with bold IPAs and light snacks such as mini flatbreads and dressed-up dogs.

**HEIST BREWERY** Located in historic Highland Park Mill, originally a cotton mill constructed in the early 1900s, Heist Brewery is a contemporary brewpub where bold, exquisite and unexpected combinations are the norm. Located just five minutes from Heist Brewery's flagship location, Heist Brewery and Barrel Arts opened last year. It fills 22,000 square feet with a 3,200-square-foot taproom, a butcher shop and a bakery selling rustic breads and pastries. This summer, a 1-acre beer garden will offer seating on the 5,000-square-foot patio.

### HYDE BREWING (THE SUFFOLK PUNCH)

Opened last year in South End, this brewery is part coffee shop that features an eclectic menu focused on local foods and global flavors, all meant to be paired with the various beers. Dishes include Moroccan-spiced ribs, housemade falafel and chicken fricassee, and there are indulgent snacks such as housemade pimento cheese. The brewery also features an on-site water tower for the purest, best-quality brewing water possible.

**SYCAMORE BREWING** Led by husband-and-wife duo Justin and Sarah Brigham, Sycamore Brewing features many seasonal and experimental ales using local ingredients, such as the Gourd Have Mercy, an amber beer brewed with heirloom barley, pumpkin and warm spices, released last fall.

**WOODEN ROBOT BREWERY** This urban farmhouse-style brew hub features 16 rotating taps paired with bites from the Twisted Eats food truck parked out front most days and serving fare that incorporates the brewery's beer.

**RED HILL BREWING COMPANY** With a taproom that operates Thursday through Saturday, this brewery in Concord serves up creative brews paired with pit-cooked barbecue from the Lil' Robert's Place food truck parked out front every other Wednesday.

**CAVENDISH BREWING COMPANY** Opened last year in a former car dealership space, this Gastonia brewpub serves a variety of beers that are paired with eats from a rotating lineup of food trucks.

**GHOSTFACE BREWING** This Mooresville taproom with flatbread pizza prepared by Davidson Pizza Company has featured food ingredients in its brews, such as strawberries in an ale.



says Alexander, who has also added juniper tips and leftover tangerine peels from nearby restaurant Kindred.

In springtime, Alexander's team looks for local wildflowers such as dandelion, honeysuckle and evergreen tips to again create teas for infusing into beer. Roasting the roots of the dandelion makes for a darker, richer beer, while the flowers produce a lighter-bodied, dry, aromatic brew. The evergreen tips, when paired with juniper and pine flowers, create a citrusy—also highly aromatic—beer without the need for extra hops.

## “WHOLE” BEERS

Just as many chefs focus on using the whole animal and the whole vegetable to decrease food waste, Alexander has done the same, though not intentionally. In addition to using those leftover tangerine peels, his team has partnered with a local grower to collect the silk of heritage corn plants to use in beer making.

The purple-hued, floral, silkier silks are collected from White Eagle corn grown by Native Americans, dried, and made into a tea with borage flowers. The tea method also helps remove any bacteria, such as occurs in pasteurization. When blended with macerated fresh plum and local oats, the result is a refreshing cream ale or saison ale perfect for late summer.

Free Range will also use White Eagle and heirloom Bloody Butcher corn kernels and silks for its first bottled beer, a rustic cream ale called Cornbread, to be released this year.

When it comes to beer-making these days, breweries need not look only to classic ingredients such as barley and hops. Charlotte's beer scene has gone local and seasonal, just like many chefs here and around the country. ■

ABOVE: Legion Brewing's Juan Direction beer with tequila-soaked limes and oranges.

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