



*Social gaming, eating and drinking is taking the bar scene by storm.*

*By Amelia Levin*

Gaming at the bar is heating up. From modern bowling and ping-pong to darts and video games, even axe-throwing, restaurant and nightlife veterans are ditching tradition to cater to a younger generation of bar-goers, day-drinkers, event planners and others with “experience-driven” social gaming concepts.

What began as a rash of arcade bars a few years ago has expanded to include other forms of entertainment. Punch Bowl Social, the Denver-based social gaming bar/restaurant with locations around the country, features not just arcades, but also bowling, karaoke and video games. At Flight Club in London, Chicago and soon-to-be Manchester, England, bar patrons throw darts outfitted with high-tech scoreboards while enjoying creative cocktails, craft beer, elevated snacks, sushi, steak and more.

“Millennials like to eat and drink well, but they also like to collect experiences. And, they are not bound by traditional dining choices,” says Robert Thompson, founder/CEO of Punch Bowl Social, in describing the gaming bar/restaurant’s core audience.

Thompson says Punch Bowl still attracts groups and parties of all ages and demographics, a fact with which Jussi Roy, food and beverage director for SPiN, a multi-unit ping-pong concept with headquarters in New York, agrees. “At any time, you can



have guests ranging from 7-year-olds to CEOs playing ping-pong next to each other, and in some cases, against each other.” That’s precisely why you’ll see many of these gaming concepts serving a full restaurant menu with traditional restaurant licensing.

The high-tech component is also part of the appeal. Flight Club bases its concept on darts, but we’re not talking your old-school dive bar with a banged-up dart board. This is a full-scale “social darts” setup, with touchscreen and video game technology for a two- or up to 400-player game that announces scores and alerts via a digital screen overhead. Banquettes and lounge-like seating around each dart board “station” allows guests to eat and drink as they play.

## *The drinks*

At Punch Bowl Social, with locations in Denver, the Pacific Northwest, Midwest, Texas, East Coast and West Coast, beverage director Patrick Williams partners with local distillers and brewers in each market to develop a core menu with regional flexibility.

“Punches are obviously our namesake, so we spend a lot of time developing those, as well as our cocktails,” Williams says. “But we also put a lot of thought into our nonalcoholic selections to ensure that our guests have their choice of drink whether they are out for a big night or going booze-free.”

The Watermelon Polo Bowl with reposado tequila, watermelon shrub, watermelon/spearmint tea, strawberry syrup and fresh lime juice remains the most popular punch

**OPPOSITE:** Patrons throw darts outfitted with high-tech scoreboards while enjoying creative cocktails, craft beer, elevated snacks, sushi, steak and more at Flight Club.

**ABOVE:** Left to right, cotton candy, 40-day dry-aged/dry-roasted short rib, and surf and turf sashimi at Flight Club.

## A look at gaming bars around the country

**AceBounce**, a British-based ping-pong chain that opened its first U.S. location in Chicago in 2016, features a more-formal dining room downstairs and a bar-focused menu upstairs where the ping-pong tables are located. The menus, curated by Chicago chef Rick Gresh, include everything from grilled chicken thigh kebabs to wood-fired pizzas and red quinoa tacos to cacio e pepe mac 'n' cheese paired with a craft cocktail program developed by Peter Vestinos. The Wonderball table uses art projection mapping to make one of the ping-pong games into a giant computer game with multiple players. Parent company Social Entertainment Ventures also operates Flight Club, a concept based on darts, and Puttshack, a high-tech mini golf experience.

**16-Bit Bar + Arcade** in Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, Ohio, features plenty of retro '80s imagery along with old-school cocktails such as the Kevin Bacon (bourbon + ginger ale + real bacon jerky) and the Cheech Marin (tequila + lime + agave nectar + orange zest). No food here, but the games are free if you drink. Sister concept Pins Mechanical Company in Columbus offers eight lanes of old-school duckpin bowling in addition to a wide selection of pinball, plus foosball, ping-pong and giant Jenga.

**Topgolf** bridges the gap between the traditional driving range and a favorite neighborhood hangout with more than 40 locations in the U.S. and the U.K. combined. Patrons can hone their golf skills (indoors or out) while enjoying upscale comfort food (chicken + waffle sliders, jumbo pretzel board) and brunch items, as well as seasonally inspired cocktails (Mai Colada, frose) and craft beer in multiple bars, a full-service restaurant, a rooftop terrace and a private meeting/event space.

**H Street Country Club** is a multistory bar in Washington, D.C., with a rooftop deck and an indoor nine-hole mini golf course, along with giant Jenga, shuffleboard and a Skee-Ball league. With bars on each level, patrons can skip long waits to enjoy various margaritas and creative cocktails paired with tacos and other Mexican-inspired favorites, as well as a semi-Mexican-inspired brunch.

The newly opened **Vigilante Gaming** in Austin, Texas, features a menu with no dishes requiring knife and fork (e.g., handheld sliders, sake bombs) so guests can eat and drink as they play a variety of board games, each catalogued in an online menu.

**Barcade**, with seven locations in four Eastern states, combines an extensive craft and draft beer list with classic arcade cabinets.

Located in San Francisco, San Diego and Sacramento, California, **Coin-Op Game Room** offers game-themed cocktails, local beers, truffle tots, burgers, chicken sandwiches, housemade doughnut balls and more (Neapolitan pizzas at the San Francisco location) with a lineup of 50 arcade machines from the '80s and '90s.



nationally. Williams has also been testing some new mezcal-based drinks to go with the Mexican-inspired menu. The El Macho, for one, has muddled cucumber, reposado tequila, housemade cardamom syrup and fresh lime juice, while the new San Diego location (opened in June) features a mezcal-based drink with premium banana liqueur—or canned chickpea liquid for a vegan-based froth—nutmeg and zested lime peel. A new punch has mezcal with grenadine, lavender syrup, fresh lemon juice, and pomegranate tea and seeds.

SPiN's most popular cocktail is also mezcal-based, with pineapple and lime and finished with a Himalayan black lava salt rim, as well as the seasonal variety of Moscow mules with gaming beer bases.

At Flight Club in Chicago, veteran mixologist/bar consultant Peter Vestinos has curated a diverse cocktail menu designed to fit the wide audience base. "Ultimately what I focused on was the Victorian fairground imagery, the idea of oddities and wonders from around the world being collected and then placed on display," he says.

That morphed into a cocktail menu featuring exotic botanicals as well as botanical beers, ciders and other blends. The Iguana cocktail, for example, blends various Jamaican rums with ginger, hibiscus liqueur, allspice, gingerbread/rooibos tea and lime, while The Royal Lion has gunpowder green tea infused with gin, English breakfast tea, thyme, East India sherry and lemon. There's also cardoon thistle amaro, artichoke liqueur and fennel liqueur in the cocktails, some of which come crowned with playful tattoo art-like decorations on the surface.

## The food

Gone are the days of the quintessential bowling club menus—those greasy-spoon items more of a second or third thought beyond the games and the beer. The food at these modern social gaming spots—with their high-standard crowds—has to be delicious, sophisticated and, of course, camera-ready.

What's unique about most of these spots is that the food and drink gets served in every area of the space. That means plenty of platters and handheld items to support snacking, sharing and gaming at the same time, even if there may be a full-entree menu, and sometimes, a separate full-service restaurant.

Punch Bowl Social just announced a complete menu overhaul (about 80% of the items will change) based on research of what's selling and what's not. Thompson traveled with celebrity chef/consulting partner Hugh Acheson to Mexico City this summer to study and research new ideas.

ABOVE, LEFT: The Taurus at Flight Club.

ABOVE, RIGHT: The El Macho—muddled cucumber, reposado tequila, housemade cardamom syrup and fresh lime juice—at Punch Bowl Social.



### Virtual cocktails

Virtual reality has gone beyond just game rooms to pair up with cocktails in bars. A global concept started by liquor brands that include Patron tequila, Dos Equis beer and, most recently, Macallan single malt Scotch whisky, these drink “experiences” might include headsets or VR goggles as part of the price point.

For \$95, patrons at Baptiste & Bottle at the Conrad Chicago hotel can don goggles for the Macallan Rare Journey, a liquor-tasting experience complete with dry ice, vintage glassware and a tableside cart carpeted in peaty moss (representing the trees used to make the barrels). The experience is enhanced by a short video detailing how the scotch is aged “from acorn to glass” in a process that takes six years to complete in rare sherry/scotch casks.

“We wanted to create an exciting experience that would touch all the senses while being educational, fun and interactive,” says Raquel Raies, Macallan’s national ambassador and the creator of the experience. “There’s so much history that isn’t told, because it’s hard to educate consumers in the usual bar/restaurant setting. The VR and tableside prep of the cocktail lets us convey so much visually and audibly that guests will walk away with so much more imprinted in their minds.”

In a swap of the original Southern comfort food dishes, the new menu will feature more street-food-Mexican meets modern dishes—green chorizo/pumpkin seed tacos, porcini mushroom/mole tacos and perhaps some enchiladas, a burrito and more—to pair with some of the popular staples to remain, such as chicken and waffles and gluten-free fried chicken.

Flight Club in Chicago has an all-day menu courtesy of local chef Rick Gresh. The lunch menu features fun snacks such as yuzu guacamole, Chicago onion dip with veggies, and fisherman’s fries with shrimp butter, ocean spice and a smoky tomato dipping sauce. There’s also a selection of sushi and sashimi and an extensive raw bar, along with large sharable entrees such as whole roasted sea bass, 40-day dry-aged roasted short rib, stuffed quail and a prime beef burger.

Named after the line where players stand to throw darts, there is also a special “oche” menu of easy to eat one-handed snacks such as flatbreads, skewers and dips. For dessert, there’s cotton candy in fun flavors, including key lime pie and toasted coconut, that can be eaten with one hand while throwing darts with the other.

SPiN takes a similar approach, with handheld snacks and sharable items that include 24-hour beer-brined Hop Pop Chicken, shrimp bao buns and duck duck goose sliders (confit duck leg, duck prosciutto, foie gras). They remain the most popular items, along with starter snacks such as shishito peppers, Thai-roasted peanuts and Mexican street-style popcorn. Handheld dessert cookies and s’mores balls round out the meal.

“The fact that we are a gaming concept drives our food offerings to be easily consumed while not detracting from your ability to socialize and play ping-pong,” says Roy.

As such gaming concepts put just as much thought, research and study into their demographics as any high-end, top-rated bar or restaurant, these relative newcomers to the bar block are becoming the new go-to. ■