

The BEVERAGE Information GROUP

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Some Really Happy Hours

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There was barely a seat to spare in the bar at Pearl Bar & Dining in Bellevue, Wa. at 4 o'clock on a Saturday afternoon. It wasn't rain driving the crowd inside this Seattle-area hot spot, but rather a hard-to-beat happy hour that offers almost every single menu item at half price.

Offered every day from 3pm until 6pm and 9pm until closing, the happy hour has been a big factor in ensuring this year-old spot is pulsing night after night.

"Obviously the strong happy hour affects our margins," said co-owner Bradley Dickinson, "but it helps with total sales—which supports cash flow. And these increased sales help to control our overall labor cost."

Dickinson and Mikel Rogers were all set to open their first joint venture in the fall of 2008 when the economy took a brisk

nosedive. Undaunted, says Rogers, "it allowed us to adjust our pricing."

The pair both have years of restaurant experience, having met while working at Schwartz Brothers Restaurants, for whom Dickinson has opened many restaurants and Rogers had front-of-house experience. Both are long-time Seattle residents.

The happy hour, which offers everything but top-shelf liquor and bottled beers for half price, has been so successful that the Bellevue Downtown Association voted it the best happy hour in the suburb.

Other local restaurants have copied part of the happy hour, says Dickinson, but they haven't gone far enough to steal business. "They might do bits and pieces (half off wine, for example), but not the whole package," says Dickinson. "We think that the consumer sees the value in our program, and that's why they continue to come back."

Half price means good price; half off is a percentage that emotionally screams value to customers, and it drops the cost of a beer down to around \$2.50, cocktails fall to the \$5 to \$6.25 range, and the 40 wines served by the glass run anywhere from \$3.50 to \$9.75.

And these are quality drinks. The wines mostly are local, with many selections from Washington's Columbia Valley, Red Mountain, Rattlesnake Hills and Horse Heaven Hills, and the beers lean that way, including Mac & Jacks, The Elysian Immortal IPA and Pyramid Hefeweizen, priced \$5 to \$5.50. Cocktails are made from scratch in-house, down to the purées, syrups, sours and salts.

The cocktails really are driving sales. Liquor accounts for around 50 percent of beverage sales, wine is 40 percent and beer accounts for the remaining 10 percent. While standard cocktails are hits, the big sellers are the Black Pearl, made with Pearl Blueberry Vodka, triple sec, house-made lemon sour, fresh blackberries and lemons, as well and the Shiso Wild Drop, made with Finlandia Wild Berry Vodka, triple sec, house-made lemon sour, muddled shiso leaf and a huckleberry tea sugar rim. Each menus for \$10 at full price.

The wine selection is intentionally local. “We wanted 70 percent or more to be from Washington, which philosophically goes along with our food,” says Rogers. When wines don’t come from Washington, they typically originate in Oregon and California, with only a smattering of the bottle list devoted to wines from other countries such as France, Italy and New Zealand.

Both the bar and restaurant feature 40 different wines by the glass, priced \$6 to \$17, a volume that is appreciated by the clientele, says bar manager Ian Keene, who notes that glass pours outsell bottle purchases in the bar by 10 to one, while in the restaurant diners often will start with a glass pour and then move on to a bottle. Having so many by-the-glass offerings allows patrons to experiment broadly, he points out, keeping their experience at a value, especially if they began their evening during the happy hour.

The bottles that tend to sell in the bar, says Dickinson, are the high-end options. “Since all wines by the glass are available at happy hour, we see that many guests will lean toward the upper end of that list when the wines are half price,” Dickinson added.

Food at Pearl, like the drinks, is both local and seasonal. Fall dishes included Alaskan halibut, priced at \$32; Dungeness crab cakes with a sweet corn butter sauce, \$26, and short ribs with Yukon Gold gnocchi, priced at \$29. Small plate dishes in the bar feature chicken with wild mushrooms, giant white beans and black truffle vinaigrette, \$9, and Berkshire pork sliders, \$10.

But it’s not just the menu that is keeping the customers coming to Pearl.

The restaurant also is visually stunning. It features an urban experience with lots of grays, silvers and blacks, including private booths shrouded in sheer, black drapes. It’s not coziness you’ll feel in Pearl’s dining room, but more detached sophistication. At the same time, the bar feels elegant and vibrant—a great place to impress a first date or have a celebration, but also low-key enough for a regular night of drinks. Parties can be intimate or social in both the bar and the dining room.

And since there’s no expiration date on the half-price happy hour, it’s likely Pearl won’t be short of either for some time to come.