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The Art of Sports

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On May 5, 2006, Jerry Everard opened a sports bar called Spitfire in downtown Seattle. Paintings were hung on the wall instead of neon signs and sports memorabilia. He eschewed a large beer selection in favor of wine and a range of Margaritas. His servers were hired for their urban edge. This would be no ordinary sports bar.

Everard describes the operation as a “thinking man’s sports bar.” His goal was to make Spitfire the type of sports bar that sophisticated types were not embarrassed to frequent. He also wanted the space to be comfortable for non-sports fans. Good food and even political discussions are among the attractions.

A guest can watch sports, enjoy the bar’s art collection and have an intellectual conversation—while savoring a hearty meal and decent wine. From any seating area, guests also can view Spitfire’s 22 flat screen TVs.

Young men in baggy T-shirts are not the target demographic, basically.

“I looked into the basic elements of a sports bar—the food, the employees, the service and the type of sports—and tried to improve on them as much as possible,” he says. “We called ourselves a sports and politics bar, because both get discussed here.”

At 6,500-square feet, Spitfire is less cavernous and a bit more cozy than the typical sports bar. Ten paintings by local artist Cutis Taylor line the room. A three-sided bar sits in the center. There are raised platforms on both sides that break up the space and form what Everard calls “terraces.” Terraces can be booked for private parties. Spitfire seats 226 people.

In addition to the bar, Spitfire has a 1,200-square-foot private room that is used roughly three times a week. The space is free if a group spends \$500 or more. If the group spends less, its organizer simply the pays the difference. The room also is used for poetry slams.

Weekends and Wednesdays are when the private room is most often booked. Consequently, Everard is trying to get more Thursday and Sunday business. To do that, he is developing other regular events. These include viewing parties for TV series and trivia nights, as well as private parties.

Sturdy, collapsible walls separate the private room from the bar. Walls can be removed for big events such as the Superbowl, the recent Presidential Inauguration or fundraisers.

Developing the Brand

Spitfire’s target customers are single, creative and in their 30s and 40s. But the bar faced a major challenge when it came to getting this group to understand the Spitfire concept. “We had to deal with the confusion in customers’ minds about what we were,” says Everard. “That’s to be expected when you’re pushing the envelope.”

The initial challenge was to get people through the door. Everard hired a public relations firm to help with

messaging and brand building. He also held a series of tequila tastings aimed at “getting people to come out and try the food.” Marketing for the tastings was aimed at local foodies, and the events sat 40. Each course was paired with a different tequila.

Everard also made the most of major television events, from the Grammys to the Academy Awards and political debates, not just those dealing with sports. Every TV in the bar would be tuned in to the particular event. “It quickly became known as an upscale sports bar,” he says, “which doesn’t really hit what we’re doing, but it’s close enough.”

Everard also shows foreign sporting events, and he draws area visitors by making sure concierges at nearby hotels know what he is showing. He even is willing to set “jet lag” operating hours. During the 2006 World Cup, for example, Spitfire’s doors opened at 6 a.m. Viewers brought their laptops, drank coffee and stayed through lunch.

“We’ve gone after the disenfranchised sports fans,” says Everard. “Other bars mostly go after the Cougars and the Huskies [local sports teams]. We go with as many different sports as we can, even the Australian Rules football.”

Individuals and small groups can request specific broadcasts. “We offer TiVo Formula One races and run them for just four guests,” he says. “It is sort of ‘on demand’ for them. Any customer can order the sport they want through the bartender.”

Spitfire also departs from sports bar lore when it comes to recruiting employees. Many of its hip and trendy servers, for example, are not disciples of Monday Night Football.

“We sometimes get criticized for not having a staff that is the most knowledgeable about sports,” he says. “But we wanted a staff that was a little more edgy or urban. We want to distinguish ourselves by having staff that is more independent-minded, and has an interest in art and culture, not just sports.”

Chardonnay with that Football?

In cultivating a more upscale image, there are just six beers on the Spitfire menu. Everard says he wanted to attract a crowd that also would be interested in wine and fresh fruit Margaritas. Brews rotate quarterly. Current offerings include Bud Light, Mac & Jack’s, Bridgeport IPA, Manny’s Pale Ale, Pyramid Hefeweizen and Stella Artois. There also is Guinness in a can. Microbrews and imports sell for \$5 a glass, while domestics go for \$4.

Wines are local and European. Several come from Washington and Oregon, such as the 14 Hands Merlot from Washington, \$7 a glass, and Oregon’s A to Z Pinot Noir, \$10. Specialty cocktail offerings include their Spitfire Mimosa, made with Cîroc Vodka, Washington-based Domaine Ste. Michelle Sparkling wine and either fresh pomegranate or orange juice, \$8, and more traditional offerings such as a Mojito made with 10 Cane Rum and a Manhattan built around Bulleit Bourbon, each \$9.

One source of pride at the bar is their line of fresh fruit Margaritas, \$9 each, available in nine different flavors that include Strawberry-Mango and Prickly Pear. Spitfire also menus four different Don Julio Tequilas—Blanco, Reposado, Añejo and Don Julio 1942, which they sell from \$9 to \$30.

On the food side, Spitfire’s menu started out heavily Latin American, “because it was different but also accessible,” says Everard. Gradually, it evolved to a more Mexican theme, purely because of demand. “We decided it was better to surprise on the quality of food and not be too adventurous on the dishes,” he adds.

The menu has a long list of small plates, almost all of which are \$7.25 each. They include Chorizo and Cheese Stuffed Mushrooms, Meatballs in Spicy Chipotle Sauce and Blackened Shrimp Tacos with a poblano-tomatillo slaw and a signature yogurt sauce. When paired with a side, plates are big enough for a meal. Sides include Spanish rice, papas fritas and rice and beans.

Entrée include Santa Fe-Inspired Chicken Enchiladas with Over Medium Egg, \$11.75, Roasted Pork Tamales, \$12.50, and prawns grilled in Pacifico beer, garlic and chili butter roux sauce, \$14.50.

Unlike many other sports bars, Spitfire serves breakfast every weekend starting at 10 a.m. Food includes Cuban Black Beans Over Spanish Rice with Two Eggs Cooked to Order, \$6.75, Sailor Jerry’s Banana Walnut French Toast, \$7, and Carne Asada with Two Eggs, \$8.50.

Spitfire is the fourth venture for Everard, who has traditionally been more involved with the independent music scene. Previous venues include The Crocodile Café, which he opened in 1991, live music venue Moe's Mo'Roc'Can Café and Rendezvous, a comfort food restaurant with a 60-seat theater.

While the Spitfire concept draws attention, the bar also makes heavy use of the internet. It has a Facebook page with more than 600 friends, and the page is used to promote its special events.

"It's a great direct marketing tool," says Everard. "People still like to use Citysearch [to learn about a place], but we do get feedback on Facebook."

Either the venue is right or it has just been marketed well. In April, a second Spitfire will open in Eastside, a suburban Seattle neighborhood that is meagerly populated with sports bars and entertainment venues.

This will be the first time Everard ever has expanded a concept. "It could be the start of a chain," he says. "There's a lot of push to get people to go to Eastside, and it was a natural location given our base clientele of young professionals. It will be a younger crowd, but similar, with single, creative folk."

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