

TOM SIETSEMA

*First Bite**Eat, drink and be happy*

"This is sure different from Hamburger Mary's!" a friend blurts out as we walk into its replacement, the highly anticipated **Birch & Barley** in Logan Circle.

Gone are the campy interior and cheap drinks. Erasing that image: Muted lighting, a burger that tastes like bratwurst and servers who are passionate about beer, foremost among them the restaurant's resident suds master, Greg Engert. The beer director for the Virginia-based Neighborhood Restaurant Group is responsible for stocking the 80-seat restaurant and its second-floor bar, the even bigger ChurchKey, with more than 500 kinds of beer from more than 30 countries.

On this particular night, Engert is selling us on the joys of Ueriges Weizen, an "awesome" unfiltered wheat beer from Dusseldorf that he appreciates for its maltiness and subtle banana, clove and bubble gum notes.

Beer isn't filling just our glasses. A generous bread board that welcomes every diner at Birch & Barley includes terrific pretzel rolls and zesty mustard, both flavored with beer. Created by pastry chef Tiffany MacIsaac, the ap-



SUSAN BIDDLE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

At Birch & Barley, Greg Engert oversees a menu of more than 500 kinds of beer.

pealing introduction suggests dessert is in order here. On my list of things to try: chocolate peanut butter tart, the young restaurant's best-selling confection. "I take it with me everywhere," says MacIsaac, who has made the dessert for two previous employers.

MacIsaac comes to Washington from Allen & Delancey in New York, as does her husband, Birch & Barley's chef, Kyle Bailey, who held the top cooking job

there. For his debut in Washington, he's feeding us a risotto that's tinted scarlet with beets and made tangy with goat cheese; cod sprinkled with pistachios and perched on crisp green beans and biting preserved lemon slices; and that brat burger. Spiked with fresh ginger and nutmeg and enriched with cream, the meat patty is packaged with sauerkraut. A mound of hand-cut french fries on the

plate dares you to leave one behind. (We don't. *Can't*, actually.)

Thump! Thump! Thump! The music from upstairs can be heard, and felt, in the restaurant. We climb the stairs to ChurchKey and find a shrine to beer and a fun menu, but not a single free seat. Mac-and-cheese sticks and BLT pizza will have to wait for another day.

1337 14th St. NW. 202-567-2576. birchandbarley.com. Entrees, \$16-\$30.

DISH