



TOM SIETSEMA
DINING

★ ★ ★ ☆
(Good/Excellent)

Birch & Barley

1337 14th St.
NW
202-567-2576
www.birchandbarley.com

OPEN: Dinner Tuesday through Thursday and Sunday 5:30-10 p.m., Friday and Saturday 5:30-11 p.m. Major credit cards.

METRO: Dupont Circle.

PRICES: Appetizers \$10 to \$14, main courses \$15 to \$30.

SOUND CHECK: 78 decibels/Must speak with raised voice



Copper pipes used for draft beer orders provide a backdrop for diners.

Birch & Barley hops

In Logan Circle, brew with a side of dinner

They take their suds seriously at Birch & Barley. Everywhere you cast an eye in one of the hottest watering holes to hit Logan Circle, there's a strong suggestion that "beer" is the proper response to "Anything to drink tonight?"

What looks like a forest of skinny tree trunks in the back bar is actually a beer "organ" of copper pipes used for draft orders. The roster of beers, 500-plus labels long, dwarfs the wine possibilities. Ask one of the servers in black T-shirts about a quaff, and you're likely to get not just a recommendation, but a history lesson and more adjectives than you've ever heard from a sommelier. The bread service (*love* those warm soft-pretzel rolls) slips beer into both the rolls and the mustard dip.

The eighth in a family of eateries owned by the Neighborhood Restaurant Group, Birch & Barley is the Virginia collection's first foray into the District. Like Tallula in Arlington, sibling Birch & Barley is two ideas under one roof; upstairs is a big bar called ChurchKey, serving munchies including deviled duck eggs and fried mac-and-cheese sticks. Like Vermilion in Alexandria, the new place is headed by a talented chef, 29-year-old Kyle Bailey from the very good Allen & Delancey in New York. Birch & Barley is as convivial as Columbia Firehouse in Old Town and puts real thought into its desserts, just like Buzz Bakery in Alexandria. I don't have much of a sweet tooth, but the warm chocolate-peanut butter tart paired with a shot of booze-infused milkshake does a vanishing act every time it's set in front of me. The magician behind it is pastry chef Tiffany MacIsaac, 28, also an Allen & Delancey alum. (She and Bailey are married.)

Bailey's menu is concise, yet his dozen or so dishes roll out a



Dining critic Tom Sietsema chats live Wednesdays at 11 a.m. at goingoutguide.com/dining. For an archive of his reviews, go to washingtonpost.com/tomsietsema.

barrel of tastes. Where beer is the focus, you expect a burger. You don't imagine it would involve a patty shaped from cream-enriched veal, pork and beef rather than just beef, or that it would come with sauerkraut rather than the usual tomato and onion. Birch & Barley's "brat burger" tastes just like the German sausage it's named for, and the hearty sandwich comes with terrific french fries that are cut by hand. As at so many restaurants now, there's octopus on the menu. (Can Olive Garden be far behind with something breaded and fried?) The treatment here — marinated and lightly grilled tentacles mounted on a loose salad of sauteed potatoes and pickled eggplant — combines lots of jazzy notes and is very appealing.

The house-made pastas bring to mind a fine Italian restaurant rather than a tavern. Bailey's feathery tagliatelle — strewn with tiny mussels, bites of sweet seafood sausage and just enough bread crumbs to give it a little crunch — is simple sophistication; his cavatelli arrives with a similar crisp accent and a lovely lamb ragu. There's no reason to miss meat in the beet-stained risotto that picks up extra brilliance from wilted greens and goat cheese in the swirl.

Birch & Barley raises the bar for fowl as well as beer, based on a superb main course of honey-lashed duck breast and confit poised on wild rice sweetened with dates. The base inspires a question: Why don't more restaurants use the nutty grain? As for the duck breast, the secret to its extraordinary crispness is in-house aging, Bailey says.

Not every dish is so polished. I pluck the pearl onions from my grits topped with pork

include five cask ales, the unfiltered, unpasteurized and highly perishable brews revered by beer mavens. The option of four-ounce pours promotes exploration of the many styles.

You'd never know that this location used to host Hamburger Mary's downstairs and a gay leather bar above it. Birch & Barley is a mere 80 seats divided among a dining room illuminated with lights nestled in Mason jars and outfitted with plus-size booths; a raised area behind that rear bar; and a kitchen counter situated so close to the cooks, you're tempted to help the flatbread baker reach for his toppings. (The thin slabs decked out with winy figs and Gorgonzola, and crumbly veal sausage and pecorino, are both delicious, by the way.) The occasional line outside is people looking to quench their thirst at ChurchKey.

MacIsaac displays a sense of humor, and casts a wide net, with her sampler of confections that puts snack food on a pedestal. If only Hostess made a chocolate cupcake as moist and light as her take. The treat shows up with other upgrades of standard vending machine fare, including a tender doughnut and a frozen chocolate pop that suggests Jell-O pudding on a stick. Not content to offer the standard bread pudding, MacIsaac whips up custardy French toast and sits it next to oatmeal ice cream and bacon-flavored caramel sauce: breakfast for dinner, and proof that bacon can find a home just about anywhere.

No doubt aided by the experience of its older siblings, Birch & Barley strikes this diner as the Neighborhood Restaurant Group's smoothest move yet. I'm all for another round.

BEHIND THE NAME

Birch & Barley is a reference to the restaurant's extensive use of two organic elements: wood and beer.