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Heartland Takes Manhattan

By: Michael Harrelson - July 6, 2009

Manhattan's Heartland Brewing is more than a scattered survivor of the micro-brewing trend of the 1990s, when brewpubs opened by the hundreds, if not thousands, before losing steam.

Heartland's heart and soul indeed belongs to that earlier era, when the coming of microbrews and craft beers unleashed a demand for better beer that consumers had pent up since Prohibition times.

While there may be an element of luck involved in the competitive shakeout, Heartland and Bloostein's sweet success in cornering nearly an entire market segment is as here and now as it gets in the tough terrain of the Big Apple's hospitality trade. It is readily apparent in a bottom line that has increased more than fourfold, from \$3 million to \$33 million in sales, in the past 11 years.

All About the Beer

Bloostein considers all six of his carefully vetted locations to be restaurants that happen to make their own beer, and not brewpubs that also serve food. However, it's the emergence of craft beer and microbrews onto the retail scene some two decades ago, and their recent comeback, that the former acquisitions consultant and Fordham University MBA credits with putting him and 400 other Heartland employee/owners at the top of the brewpub heap.

"Without the resurgence of crafts, there would be no sales," Bloostein says. "Our beer is what defines us. We sell a ton of food, but beer is a strong identifying character. It gives us an opportunity to relate to our guests and to talk about products only available in our restaurants. They ask, 'Is this really apricot?' We tell them 'Yes' and offer them a taste."

"We have light, lager, amber, pale ale, wheat beer and stout," Bloostein says. "They represent a very full array of beers with different character and flavors. Somebody is bound to find something they like out of those beers. I don't care if they like all seven, but I do care if they don't find anything they like."

"We like to try two or three different beers a year that we have not done before, and if we don't get it exactly right, we keep trying," he says.

Sheer Synergy

In seeking the greater food and beer synergy that may be as critical to gaining the competitive edge in a down economy as food and wine in better days, Bloostein leaves little left undone.



Arlene Spiegel, founder and president of New York City's Arlene Spiegel & Associates, is a respected food-and-beverage consultant who has advised Bloostein and Heartland Brewery on organizational and infrastructure development and site criteria issues for many years. She says it's nothing for Bloostein to get on a plane and traverse great distances just to buy a beer poster for one of his brewpub venues.

"The thing about Jon that distinguishes him is his passion for his brand," Spiegel observes. "He really goes deep into trying to deliver a special experience to his guests."

Before a new beer or food item appears on the menu at Heartland Brewery, Spiegel says you can bet that Bloostein has done his homework.

"All of his beer recipes are engineered. An item does not go on the menu because it sounds good. It has to meet some very rigid requirements to see if it can be executed throughout the restaurant chain."

To Spiegel, another example of Bloostein's business acumen is his most recent HB Burger expansion — a start-up venture that, as a burger and shake joint, marks a clear departure from his other Heartland units. "Many of the folks in the community he serves are looking for comfort food at a lower price point. At HB Burger, they can enjoy the dining experience and still get all of the beers."

Next to the venues themselves, which range in size from the 3,400-square-foot Seaport location to the 15,500-square foot Heartland Brewery & Rotisserie venue housed in the Empire State Building, the most salient example of Bloostein's total emersion strategy for guest satisfaction may be the brewpub chain's 12,000-square-foot brewery in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn.